

# JEEVADHARA

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## ASCETICISM TODAY

THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF

PENANCE TODAY

*Cyprian Illickamury*

CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM:

IMITATION OF CHRIST

*Mathew Parinthirickal*

CRITIQUE OF HEDONISM

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*Felix Podimattam*

REFINING THE MIRROR

ASCETICISM OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

*Francis Alapatt*

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## CONTENTS

Editorial

Theological Understanding of  
Penance Today

*Cyprian Illickamury*

Christian Asceticism:  
Imitation of Christ

*Mathew Parinthirickal*

Critique of Hedonism

*Aleyamma Abraham*

Critique of Rigourism

*Felix Podimattam*

Refining the Mirror:  
Asceticism of St. Francis of Assisi

*Francis Alapatt*

397

415

428

435

462

## Editorial

For many people today asceticism, mortification, abnegation etc., are 'turn off' words whose mere mention makes them smile. They feel that ours is too enlightened an age to appreciate asceticism which is supposedly one of those medieval practices commentators and writers speak about when they wish to deride or ridicule. As they see it, psychiatry, stressing as it does the enjoyment of the good things of this world and the expansion of human capacities, rules asceticism out as something harmful to mental health.

Going beyond the culturally conditioned historical expressions of asceticism and reflecting on its underlying meaning, we note that asceticism remains and will ever remain a basic condition for growth in holiness. Neither objections nor prejudices can disprove the need of asceticism in human life.

Is it outmoded to practise humility rather than pride, to bless God for the blessings and bounties others enjoy rather than to be envious of them, to be patient in the face of provocation rather than to explode in violent anger, to be temperate in food and drink rather than to give oneself to gluttony, to work assiduously with hands and minds rather than to be lazy, to be detached from material goods and to share them with others rather than to be captivated by greed and avarice ?

Asceticism is not exactly rigid fasting, long vigils or stiff penances. An asceticism which conjures up memories of austere practices may no longer be relevant. Indeed we find the hair-shirts, disciplines and spiked bracelets of sixteenth century monasteries not only irrelevant but

psychologically suspect. Asceticism is the practice of right living, namely, living the truth that our life is different from that of the brute. It is living a life wherein the impulses, drives and urges are so harnessed as to make us spiritually free. Asceticism in terms of renunciation of false self, control and discipline of certain distorted tendencies, does no more than canalize human energy into virtuous power and enable us to rise to higher loving. Asceticism is never an end in itself, but a means to an end. Ascetical control, purification, mortification, restraint and discipline are valid only to the extent that they are conducive to greater love of God and brethren. We can accept asceticism only to the degree that it is obviously related to helping us achieve a more just and loving life.

Cyprian Illickamury tries to throw light on the reality of penance in its theological aspects. After examining the concept of penance in both the OT and NT he shows what should be the meaning and form of penance for the man of today. True asceticism, according to Mathew Parinthirickal, springs from a loving imitation of Christ and it requires self-denial so as to enable one to be at the service of one's fellowmen. Aleyamma Abraham in her critique of hedonism gives several reasons to show the need for self-discipline in life. Critique of rigourism by the section editor is a necessary and fitting complement to it. A manichean disdain of the body has no place in Christian life. The problem, however, is not the legitimacy or illegitimacy of pleasure but its coordination with the other goals of life in the perspective of the total personality of man. The last article by Francis Alappat deals with the asceticism of Francis of Assisi who has been widely acclaimed the 'Mirror of Christ' and what went behind his refining the mirror.

# Theological Understanding of Penance Today

The word 'Penance' often evokes unpleasant associations and gloomy fantasies. It means different things to different people, some of which have nothing to do with the 'good news' proclaimed by Jesus. In the course of centuries the sacrament of penance and penitential works have been unfortunately separated from the reality of penance which is the basic structure of Christian life itself. It is, therefore, necessary to have a clear idea of what it really is. For this, we must turn to the Sacred Scriptures, and above all, to the proclamation of Jesus.

## 1) Penance in the Old Testament

First of all, it is to be noted that the word 'penance' is a poor translation of the concept in the Bible, which means much more than what we usually understand by it. The original word for doing penance in the OT (*shub* in Hebrew; *thubu* in Aramaic) really signifies the physical act of turning back. Our relation to God is conceived as a way. When one sins, one goes away and takes the opposite direction so that one is completely cut off from God. Penance means now a complete turning and going again in the direction of God<sup>1</sup>. In the NT the corresponding word *metanoia* signifies a radical change of thought and attitude<sup>2</sup>. The man called to penance has to change his accustomed way of thinking, evaluating, choosing and acting. He has to place himself and his whole life at the

1) Cf. *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. X. Leon Dufour), 430

2) Cf. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel), Vol. IV, 975-80 (J. Behm)

disposal of God. In effect it means return to the original relationship he had with God. This biblical meaning of the word penance has to be always borne in mind.

The Bible, we know, is the history of God's personal encounter with man in a relationship of love and goodness, inviting and enabling man to be the partner of the divine dialogue, which aims at his well-being and salvation. But from the beginning of this history we also see the failure of man to respond to God's call. Unilaterally man breaks the dialogue, fails to be 'responsible' and prefers to go his way, which leads only to ruin. From the very narration of the earthly paradise starts also the story of man's sin. Thus, for the OT man is a sinner. However, sin is not a fate with no way out for man. The OT knows even more about God's love, mercy and readiness to forgive. There is no sin that God cannot take away (Is 1:18), only that the sinner must be ready to turn back from his evil ways and turn to God. Therefore the prophets call Israel again and again to repentance (Is 55:7). Admonition to penance and conversion played an important role in the religious life of Israel both as a community and as individuals<sup>3</sup>. Rites and forms of expiation for sin were provided several times a year (cfr. Lev ch. 16). Times of calamities like plagues and wars gave occasion to the people specially to reflect upon their sin and infidelity before God. They saw in these a just punishment from God. And penance is considered the means to appease the anger of God. Their penance finds expression in a penitential liturgy, consisting of days of expiation, public rites and prayers of expiation. Thus, on the occasion of a pest of locusts the prophet Joel describes the misery it has brought upon the people, sees in it a punishment of God and calls the people to public rites and observance of penance (Joel 1:13f; 2:15-17)<sup>4</sup>. This text shows that both the calamity and the penance are concerns

3) Cfr. J. Pathrapankal, *Metanoia Faith Covenant*, Bangalore 1971  
93-106

4) Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Eerdmans) 1976, 46-84

of the whole community. Acknowledgement of sin, penitential litany, sackclothes and ashes, fasting, abstinence from sexual life, weeping and wailing, expiatory sacrifice etc. were connected with this form of public penance (cfr. Is 22:12). These external acts were intended to express the real inner attitude of penance.

But as it often happens, these rites and external acts gradually came to be looked upon as a substitute for the real attitude of penance and conversion. Rather than being an expression of real interior penance, they became a threat to it. Hence the prophets protest vehemently against this form of externalization of penance and conversion. They remind the people that the mere performance of the external rites of penance has no value before God. What God demands is a conversion of heart, a change of life. "Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful..." (Joel 2:13). The sinner is called to turn away from his iniquity, rectify the evil he has done and turn to God with all his heart, and then God will be merciful to him (Ez 18:21f).

The genuineness of penance is shown in the renewal of one's relationship with one's fellowmen. It is not works of penance of some sort or other that are demanded, but deeds of brotherly love, as Isaiah has admirably expressed (58:5.7). Works of penance are useless, unless there is at the same time the readiness to cease from hatred and enmity and to help the suffering fellowmen. The prophets have also shown clearly that the sin of the individual, even if secret, affects not only his relationship to God but also his relationship to his fellowmen and the whole community<sup>5)</sup>. Hence they call upon the community to remove sin from its midst. Every sin affects the covenant relationship of this community with Yahweh. So too, conversion is not the conversion of the individual sinner for himself, but it is return to the

5) Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, N. Y. 1962, 264-66

covenant people. As a member of this people that form a unity both in guilt and in conversion, the individual sinner finds pardon from God. So the prophets admonish the whole community to do penance. If they do so, Yahweh will again accept it as a community and will establish His covenant of grace with it (Is 54; Jer 31:31ff)<sup>6</sup>.

Even when the prophets call Israel again and again to penance, they understand penance ultimately as an act of the merciful God himself. God does not leave the sinner alone to himself. He is near to him with His help and concern (Ez 34:11-16). In His graciousness He makes man turn to Him. He gives salvation as a free gift (cfr. Hos 2:16f; 3:1-5), He establishes the new covenant (cfr. Jer 31:31-34), He gives a new heart (Ez 11:19f; 36:26; Is 44:22). Thus, penance is ultimately an accomplishment not of man but of God. Man must only open himself to God.

## 2) Penance in the New Testament

When we come to the NT<sup>7</sup>, first of all, we meet the person of John the Baptist and his proclamation of penance in the face of the great coming judgment of Yahweh. He called all Israel to penance, even the leaders of the people and the so-called pious ones, who did not think that they needed any penance. Penance was for him the last remaining possibility to escape from the imminent and terrible chastisement that was about to descend upon the world. With the preaching of penance John joins the baptism of penance as the sign of a true conversion of heart. This conversion must be manifested in daily life in one's conduct towards the fellowmen (Lk 3:10-14), which is the touchstone of one's relation to God himself. John's preaching of penance stands in the same line as that of the OT and especially the prophets.

6) Cfr. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel), Vol. IV, 980-89 (E. Wuerthwein)

7) Ibid. 999-1009 (J. Behm)

The biblical proclamation of penance reaches its highest and unsurpassable point in the preaching of Jesus. 'Jesus public life begins according to the oldest gospel with the call to penance and faith in the "good news": 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel' (Mk 1:15). Placing this manifesto of Jesus at the very beginning of the public life of Jesus, Mark has shown the heart of Jesus' message of the good news. By his call to <sup>8)</sup>repentance Jesus demands a complete change of direction in man's life, and not merely a change of feelings, thoughts or attitude in some particular case. He confronts man with the disquieting question, if the direction of his life is correct, if the foundation of his life is a safe one. However, this call of Jesus to penance is understandable only against the background of the gospel of the good news of the kingdom of God. Jesus does not simply place before his hearers the uncompromising demands of God, but rather he proclaims God's nearness to man with his boundless love and forgiveness. God loves all men, the just and the sinner. He has care and concern for each one. Each one is precious before Him and is uniquely loved by Him. God has at heart the well-being and salvation of each man and He grants this salvation freely and gratuitously, because He is the loving Father<sup>8)</sup>. Man need not strain and torture himself, thinking how he can find God's love and mercy, how he can stand before the judgment seat of God. He need not desperately and frantically devise and follow his own projects of salvation. These can only lead him to become a slave of creatures and finally bring him to perdition. Only God can be the secure foundation of his life. And God is all for him. He gives man security and salvation and that freely. Man has only to come out of his self-enclosedness and isolation and open himself to God. He has only to pull down the false foundation he has already laid on creatures, so that he can now make a complete new start and build upon God and His

8) Cf. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, Vol. I, London 1971  
(SCM) 173-78

forgiveness and love. He can completely cast himself upon this God. It is a unique chance which man has simply to lay hold of. Even sinners are not excluded from God's love. Rather with predilection God loves them and offers himself to them. That is why Jesus too goes after sinners, keeps company with them and have meals with them as a sign of communion<sup>9</sup>.

Jesus calls upon man to seize this chance, turn completely to God and live keeping his orientation to Him. That is what he means by 'believing in the gospel'. This new life implies separation from what had been the foundation and centre of his life so far, separation from what he had been living for and labouring for so far. This separation is what Jesus means by penance, metanoia or conversion. Evidently faith and penance belong together. They are two aspects of the same reality. This becomes clear from the double parable of the treasure hidden in the field and the costly pearl (Mt 13: 44-46). In this parable Jesus has shown concisely and precisely what penance is. It dawns upon man that the most precious possession that he can have in life is God and that He alone can give aim and meaning to life. All that had appeared so far to be the centre and meaning of his life becomes insignificant and even despicable before this unexpected discovery that he makes. Therefore 'in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field' (Mt. 13:44). So for Jesus penance is not at all a gloomy and oppressive reality. It is the unexpected discovery of a treasure. Or again as shown in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15: 11-32), penance is departure from the strange land of hunger and misery in order to come back home. And the joyful home-coming is celebrated at the end of the story with a feast of joy.

This parable was directed to those who criticized Jesus' association and fellowship at meals with the tax collectors and sinners (Lk 15:1f). The conventional pious

9) Ibid. 113-18.

ones fail to understand that God is different from what they imagine. They do not realize that in Jesus himself God's love and forgiveness has become manifest, as also his claim upon man. They miss the unique chance that God offers them. They are not ready to become like little children (Mt 18:3), and admit their poverty before God. The priests and the leaders think that they are all right before God, they do not recognize that they also are sinners, they refuse to be converted. But the tax collectors and sinners realize their poverty and misery, acknowledge their sins and experience forgiveness (Lk 7:36-50; 19:1-10; 23:40-43). But the refusal of God's love and mercy has also its consequences. While the sinner is admitted to the great joy of the banquet, those who refuse God's love and mercy find themselves cut off from this banquet. Like the Galilean towns that refused to be converted and to believe in the gospel, they come under the woes uttered by Jesus (Mt 11:20-24; 23:37-39; Mk 12:41f; Lk 11:31f; 13:3.5).

Conversion to God and the total orientation of one's life to Him has its consequences. The man who has received God's love and forgiveness gratuitously has the obligation to extend the same love and forgiveness to his neighbour. He is now called upon to love his neighbour even as God loves him, and to work for his integral liberation and all-embracing salvation, which is the characteristic of God's kingdom, as proclaimed and initiated by Jesus. The man who has experienced God's unconditional love and forgiveness is freed from his self-centredness. He is enabled to go out of himself to love, forgive and spend himself for his neighbour. The violence he has to do to himself, the repugnance he has to overcome, the lethargy he has to get over in order to do it is his concrete penance. It is from here that we have to understand the radical demands of the sermon on the mount: 'You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles ... But I say to you'

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." (Mt 5: 38ff) Forgiveness and love of enemies especially show the genuineness of one's conversion to God. This is well illustrated by the parable of the wicked servant (Mt 18: 23-34).

Jesus had called the people to penance and faith in the context of the kingdom of God that was come near to man. The death and resurrection of Jesus revealed that this kingdom of God had drawn near to man in the very person of Jesus himself, that he himself was the kingdom of God. The disciples of Jesus who had come together after his resurrection and who constituted the Church, continued Jesus' call to penance. They called the people to believe in the love and forgiveness of God revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, to turn back from their sinful life, and to receive baptism as a sign of the radical change in their life. Many people accepted their message, believed in the gospel, and underwent baptism, which really meant a profound transformation in their life. They were really Christians by conviction, dead to all sin and selfishness, and really living by the spirit of Christ.

The apostolic Church soon realized that in spite of the redeeming death of Jesus Christ that snatched away men from the power of evil and sin and brought them to a new life through faith and baptism, still the danger of falling into sin was still there<sup>10</sup>. Though the Church was called to holiness as a community of saints, she had to experience the weakness and sinfulness of her own members. St. Paul had time and again to admonish his Christians to be watchful that sin does not rule over them any more (Rom 6:12-23). He was really shocked to find in his communities so much of pettiness, quarrels and egoism. He saw that there was even real danger of falling away from the faith (Gal 1:6; 4:9). Hence he fervently exhorts his Christians to hold fast to the faith, knowing that it is not a once-for-all sure possession.

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10) J. Finkenzeller, Sunde. Umkehr und Vergebung der Sunde aus biblischer und dogmengeschichtlicher Sicht, in: E. Feifel (ed.), Busse Bussakrament Busspraxis. Munich 1975, 26-50, esp. 36-39

The struggle against sin in the community was considered to be the task of all its members. For Christ has called all to holiness. All the baptized together form the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy people of God. To receive this holiness and to restore it, if lost, was seen to be the concern of all the members. When one member sinned, the whole community was affected. So it was the duty of all to see that sin in the community was overcome. How the community had to deal with a serious case of incest in Corinth is shown to them by Paul in Cor 5. The Apostle asks them to get the man out of their community for a time, 'to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus' (5:5). The purpose of this judgment was not to shut him out permanently from the community, but to lead him to penance and conversion, so that he might be received again as a full member into the community. About the reception back of a repentant sinner St. Paul speaks in 2 Cor 2:5-11. Here he admonishes the community to be gentle and loving towards the sinner, to forgive and receive him back. Other instances in Paul's letters show that this was a general practice in the Pauline communities: cfr. 2 Thess 3:6-14'. We must see this practice of excommunication against the background of the situation of the communities in those days. They were small communities, existing as small minorities in overwhelmingly pagan surroundings. They were easily exposed to the danger of falling away from the Christian faith. And the purpose of the punishment was to help the brother and not simply to execute judgment upon him.

The problem of the struggle against sin was not peculiar to the Pauline communities. The 'community rule' in Mt 18:15-18 also shows how the community and its members have to conduct themselves with regard to sin in its midst. One who sees the sin of a brother must first of all correct him privately (cfr. Lev 19:17). If he refuses to repent and to be converted, he should take also one or two witnesses to give emphasis to his admonition (cfr. Deut 19:15). If that also fails, then it is to be brought to the notice of the community. If he refuses to listen even to

the community, then, he is to be excluded or excommunicated from the community: 'Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' (Mt 18:18). The decision of the community is valid before God. The two words "bind" and "loose" are quite important here. To bind means in this context to exclude or excommunicate from the community. But it is not a permanent exclusion, rather it is ordained towards 'loosing'. To 'loose' means to remove the excommunication, to receive the repentant sinner back into the community. As long as the sinner is excluded from the community, he can have no fellowship with God as a Christian. Jn 20:21-23 is also to be understood like the community rule in Mt 18:15-18. The words used here are 'forgive' and 'retain'. They have the same meaning as bind and loose. These words are a reflection of the practice of the Johannine communities in dealing with sin in their midst. James 5:15f speaks of concern for the erring brother, acknowledgement and confession 'of sins to one another, and prayer for one another, which will obtain forgiveness from God. Just as Mt 5:23f this passage also shows that confession and reconciliation must take place in the interpersonal sphere. All these passages from the NT show that the Church has seen from the earliest times its function in the process of the conversion of the sinner as offering again her fellowship to him and interceding for him, so that he may find forgiveness from God. The individual Christian does not come before God in independence and isolation from the community to ask for pardon but he must do it as the member of the Church. In the Church the sinner experiences again God's forgiveness. Thus the Church understands herself as a community of reconciliation, which accepts the repentant sinner back and intercedes for him before God. She has the certainty that her intercession will be effective and will give the sinner again fellowship with God because of the promise of Christ.

(3) Dogmatical - historical review of  
penance in the Church<sup>11</sup>

A second penance or conversion of those who had once come to faith and then had fallen into some grave sin was not at once and everywhere thought possible in the Church. In the Letter to the Hebrews relapse into a grave sin after the first conversion is considered as good as eternal perdition (6: 4-8; 10: 26.31; 12: 15-17). I Jn 5: 16 also speaks in the same vein. Such passages reveal the seriousness of sin and the Christian's duty to guard against it. However, faith in the God of love and mercy as revealed by Jesus brings the conviction in the Church that God will not cast out even the believer who had fallen, but who now repents. But it was also clear that if a second conversion was possible, it would be only under hard conditions. The excommunication from the community was meant to bring home to him the seriousness of his plight. It was also intended to show that his sin was not laid to the charge of the Church and its message of salvation. When the sinner repented of his sin and desired to be reconciled to the Church, he was admitted to public or canonical penance. First of all, he had to undergo hard penances. It was said that the first conversion (baptism) was through water, the second through tears. A number of works of penance thus arose in the Church, like the use of penitential clothes, keeping to special places in the church, kneeling and begging pardon of the faithful, fast, solitary life, abstinence from married life etc. All this lasted for weeks, months and even years. Their severity was meant to ensure that the conversion was real.

After the second conversion, however, there was hardly any possibility for a third conversion or reconciliation

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11) M.-B. Carra de Vaux Saint-Cyr, *The Sacrament of Penance. An Historical Outline*, in: Michael J. Taylor (ed.) *The Mystery of Sin and Forgiveness*, Bombay 1975, 115-52; J. Finkenzeller, op. cit' 40-50; Franz Nikolasch, *Die Feier der Busse*, Wuerzburg 1974, 26-41

with the Church. If a man who had come to second conversion seriously sinned again, the possibility of his reconciliation with God was not denied, but there was little possibility of a reconciliation with the Church. What was left for him was life-long penance, i.e., practically complete withdrawal from the world, from marriage etc. and life-long fast. The consequence was that one would postpone the second conversion as long as possible, so that there would be no chance for a third conversion. For most people second conversion became practically a preparation for death. So too the Church often refused to admit young people, married people etc. to public penance, because of the founded suspicion that they would not be able to do such hard penances. We also see, especially after the 6th century, that many penitents who had undergone the public penance often do not keep the obligations they have taken upon themselves. They grow again their hair, put away penitential clothes, marry or continue to live in marriage. Synods warn against it, and sometimes re-excommunicate such persons, but often to no avail. Gradually the conviction comes that personal doing of penance together with the desire of the sacrament would be enough, especially for those who could not undergo public penance before death.

There arose also rites of penance which were imitations of the public penance of the Church, though in simpler forms. One confessed one's sins not before the bishop and the community, but before a simple priest, monk or even a spirit-filled lay man. The latter imposed penances, and said a prayer of intercession and blessing. Such private rites of penance were popularized especially by the Irish-Scotish monks from the 6th century. They became very popular because they helped to fill up the spiritual and pastoral vacuum left by the practice of public penance. This system of penance is also marked by the adaptation of celtic and Germanic patterns of law and has come to be known as 'tariff penance'. In this system sinners could be admitted to penance as often as they had sinned and were repentant.

Both in the public penance and in the tariff-penance satisfaction or doing the works of penance was considered the most important factor. Later in the 11th century the idea became prevalent that confession before a priest was itself a work of penance, because of the aspect of shame that is involved. So confession came to be considered the most important part of the rite of penance. Other penances became almost secondary. The work of penance in the sacrament was reduced to a prayer, an almsgiving or some little mortification. The promoters of private and frequent confession, however, helped to sharpen the conscience of the Christian people regarding even their ordinary failures and sins. Pious Christians learned to understand themselves as continually falling behind the demands of the Christian life. They realized their sinfulness and the need they have of awakening and keeping alive the spirit of penance. Thus, works of penance which had, so to say, wandered out of the sacrament of penance, came back to Christian life outside of it. That is especially true of the monastic life. We find again a clever system of penance practised by the monks and other consecrated persons, which included among other things the wearing of hair shirts and chains with nails, scourging, vigils etc. From the high middle ages there comes also the motive of sharing in the passion of Christ. So one sought physical pain and privations and devised means to inflict them upon oneself.

#### 4) Penance Today

Now, we may ask ourselves if works of penance are meaningful even today. And what kind of works of penance? We have seen that the call to penance belongs to the very core of the Christian proclamation. We are called to penance today no less than the Christians of the earlier generations. But the practices or works of penance today may differ from those of another generation. Penance is not the same thing as works of penance. Works may come and go, but penance must always remain. It is an essential part of Christian life. But if it is to be real, it must also find expression in penitential works.

Which are the works of penance that safeguard the reality of penance and are meaningful for the man of today? We have seen that penance is a turning back from the way that does not lead to God and is a radical conversion to Him and orientation to His salvific will. That means a complete change in attitudes, perspectives, values. What were so far the most important interests of our life become now relative, secondary or even worthless. Or, as St. Paul has expressed it graphically, 'But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ' (Phil 3:7f). Now, has such a revaluation, such a change of perspectives, such a conversion, really taken place in our life? Baptism was the symbol of this conversion. But has it remained only a symbolic conversion. Even if this conversion has taken place, there is the real danger that we again and again turn back to our sinful past, because the allurements and impulses of the past are not destroyed or overcome with our baptism, or with the conversion. Our life has to be a continuous struggle against the effects of sin, even after our sin has been forgiven, even after our conversion to God. This struggle is what we call satisfaction for our sin. This concept played a very important role in the sacramental penance of the early Church. Even today it is a constitutive element of the sacrament. A proper understanding of the concept of satisfaction will help us to see better the role of penance in Christian life.

In the traditional language of the Church satisfaction refers primarily to the temporal punishments merited by sin. The Church teaches that we have the possibility of making satisfaction for these temporal punishments. These do not get cancelled with the forgiveness of sin. Scholastic theology distinguishes in sin guilt and punishment. Punishment itself is distinguished into eternal punishment and temporal punishments. When God forgives sin, the eternal punishment is also taken away

as belonging intrinsically to sin. But there remain the temporal punishments. Satisfaction aims at their removal. Now, temporal punishments should not be thought of as some physical evil imposed upon the sinner by God. Then what are they? Sin causes a break in the relationship of man not only with God and His grace, but also in his relationship to himself. It alienates him from the very roots of his own life. Sin leaves behind marks and relics (*reliquiae peccati*) in his attitude, in the way he reacts to the demands of life, in his imagination, memory and so on. It makes him less of a man. It weakens and influences his decisions. It feeds the evil inclinations in him, which sometimes lead him again into sin. When he wants to do good, he finds that it is not so easy to do it as before his sin. He has to struggle now more against his selfishness, hardheartedness, apathy, laziness and so on. He is like one who has become an addict to drink or hash. It requires now from him an extraordinary struggle to come out of this fateful situation and to meet the demands of life. This struggle, pain and effort, we may say, are precisely the temporal punishments for his sin. They are not something imposed upon him by God, but they are the natural consequences of his free act of sin. They are called temporal punishments because they are experienced in time and they can be overcome also in time, i. e., in this life. Their character as punishment is experienced by the sinner when he wants to turn to God again. He has now the painful experience that his good will alone does not suffice. Unmortified nature, disorderly passions, all offer resistance against his coming away from egoism and opening himself to God and the fellowman. He finds that he is no more the master of the situation. Now, ordinarily God does not work a miracle and remove from man the natural consequences of his sin, even when the sin is forgiven. Man has to struggle against them, and that makes his turning to God difficult and painful. He has to bear this pain, fight against his lethargy, and shake himself up with manful effort to do what God demands of him now. That is what is meant by satisfaction.

Satisfaction refers to our personal sin. But there are in us also tendencies of hidden rebellion, opposition, doubt, mistrust and hardening against God which do not seem to come from personal sin. Then, where do they come from? The theology of original sin teaches us and the human sciences confirm that the world in which we live, our situation and milieu, the attitudes and habits that we have acquired through them, all exercise a baneful influence on our choices and decisions. These grow up with us even as we grow from childhood to manhood and allure us to sin. Every sin of every individual in the world adds to the sinful situation of the world and becomes a further evil influence for the future generations. This is what we call original sin<sup>12</sup>. It often darkens the mind, weakens the will and diminishes the freedom of the individual. Hence we have to be on guard against it, fortifying our will and strengthening our resolutions, so that we will not be caught unawares, when it assaults us. Above all, we have to depend continually on God and His grace.

Satisfaction for past sins and fighting against the consequences of original sin can today be better understood as the asceticism of following Christ<sup>13</sup>. Christian asceticism is really the asceticism of following Christ. Sometimes asceticism, has been misunderstood even in Christian spirituality as magical asceticism, religious or cultic asceticism and moral asceticism<sup>14</sup>. Christian asceticism is something different from all these forms of asceticism, which are at bottom pagan and unchristian in conception. The word asceticism itself occurs only very rarely in the NT, but what is meant by it is expressed as the following of Christ: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mk 8: 34f). Jesus does not ask his follower to take up some

12) Piet Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin*, London 1965, 124 91.

13) Ferdinand Kerstiens, *Wie wir christlich leben können*, Mainz 1973, 24-28.

14) Ibid, 21-24

cross or other of his own choice. He does not ask him to perform some acts of ascetic exercise, renunciation or sacrifice. Jesus himself does not embrace the cross as an act of freely chosen asceticism. The cross was imposed upon him as the consequence of his total surrender to the Father and his service and solidarity with men. In the Garden of Gethsemane he cried out to the Father: "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou willst" (Mk 14:36). And we hear again the cry of Jesus: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34) Jesus' cross was simply the consequence of his life for God and men. It was the consequence of his love and solidarity for the poor, the sinners, the marginalized, in short, it was the consequence of his mission from the Father. Love always costs something. Jesus calls his followers to love, even as he has loved: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (Jn 15:12f). The demands of the sermon on the mount show the extent to which the Christian may have to go in fulfilment of his mission. St. Paul has very graphically described the asceticism of following Christ and being faithful to one's mission: 'Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods, Once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea. danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And apart from other things there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches' (2 Cor 11:24-28). As defence against his adversaries here Paul describes all that he had to suffer for the sake of the gospel and in fidelity to his mission. What he suffers he has not chosen for himself. But here we see the freedom of the Christian to take upon

himself everything that his mission involves. And that he understands as sharing in the cross of Christ, as dying with Christ, and therein he experiences also the hope of rising with him (cfr. Phil 3:7-21). Of course, Paul also speaks of moral asceticism, (as in 1 Cor 24-37), but this must be understood in the context of the asceticism of following Christ.

The mission of the Christian in the following of Jesus may involve extreme situations, where he has even to give up his life like the Master. But it is above all, in living for the neighbour that he has to follow Jesus. Jesus' life, we know, was completely at the service of the salvific will of God for man. Jesus himself has revealed to us that God wants the integral liberation and total salvation of man — the whole man and all men. This salvation means salvation of body and soul, salvation here and salvation hereafter. The salvation and well-being of man is the concern of God. Jesus himself has this concern. And now he entrusts his followers with the same concern. Freed from all sin, selfishness and self-concern by the death and resurrection of Christ, they are enabled and commissioned to have concern for one another, to live for one another, even as Jesus has done. They have to stand up and defend the poor and the oppressed, be the voice of the voiceless, the champions of those who have nobody to defend them; they have to struggle for justice, peace and freedom, they have to engage themselves for the building up of a human fellowship where the values of the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed come alive again. But to follow Jesus this way can easily meet with resistance. It can bring opposition and persecution. It may be from one's own unmortified self-love, it may be from one's own dear and near ones, it may be from strangers. It will bring the cross. It can even mean crucifixion. The Christian who stands firm and continues his mission is the one who takes up his cross and follows Jesus. That is what is really meant by Christian asceticism and Christian penance today.

## **Christian Asceticism: Imitation of Christ**

Asceticism is found in almost all Religions of the world. A truly ethical life demands that man practises a certain amount of self-discipline and renunciation. Christianity too insists on self-discipline, renunciation and various other ascetical practices. It is part and parcel of Christian life. But those who despise and combat Christianity protest against what is Christian because they see in Christian asceticism a contempt for the world, unfaithfulness to and flight from earthly tasks, lack of appreciation of the good and the beautiful in the world and in human life. It cannot, however, be denied that in the course of centuries Christian asceticism acquired a negative tone, at least in the minds of a vast majority of the faithful. So the criticism that is levelled against Christian asceticism cannot simply be brushed aside. We will have to make a serious study to see whether the accusation is true or not. This study is a humble attempt to probe into the true nature of Christian asceticism with a view to correct the false notions that still persist in Christian thinking and practical living and to highlight its positive elements. Here there is no claim to completeness.

### **Notion of Asceticism**

The word asceticism is derived from the Greek word *askesis* which means training, exercise, practice etc. In the religious and philosophical context it means abstinence from food and drink, permanent or occasional control of one's sexual life, renunciation of material wealth, of various human possibilities including even

that of human communication. Such an abnegation can be motivated by various factors. Among many peoples it means a man's symbolic death in order to rise with the gods whose resurrection is cultically celebrated. Here it means the self-emptying and self-emancipation of man in order to ensure the inflow of the divine and supernatural powers.

In Buddhism, for instance, asceticism helps to overcome the fallenness of man in a world of appearances and of the selfish desires. Ascetic practices serve the liberation of man, the experience of harmony with every being, or the entrance into Nirvana. That is to say, through asceticism man's inordinate desires are curbed and his union with the unfathomable mystery is effected<sup>1</sup>. The famous Tamil Poet and mystic Tiruvalluvar speaks in the same vein when he says: 'Self-control leads unto heaven, but uncontrolled passion is the royal road to endless darkness'<sup>2</sup>. The self-control, renunciation etc. advocated here is not to be seen in a purely negative sense, as has been customary among Christians to think about the Indian ascetic practices. This will be clear from the fact that *Tirukkural* presents the life of asceticism as the second stage in the life of the person, the first stage being the domestic life. The immediate precedence of the domestic life to the ascetic life seems to indicate that the latter has its roots in the rich soil of domestic life, and that it is maturing one's faculties and extending them from the exclusive and narrow wall of domestic love to embrace the whole universe. In *Tirukkural*'s vision asceticism makes a person more than ever other-oriented. A good number of couplets in the *Tirukkural* marks off universal love as the hall-mark of ascetic life. Thus *Tapas* or penance which is commonly taken to be a negative act receives a positive meaning here. It does not stand primarily for physical mortification

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1. G. Scherer, Askese. in; Adolf Exeler-G. Scherer, Glaubens Information, Herder, Freiburg 1971, P. 31.
  2. Tiruvalluvar, *Tirukkural*, here, cited by J. Kuttianimattathil and Ivo Coelho, In one Salutation to Thee, Don Bosco, Bangalore 1985. P. 127.

but it enables the ascetic to put up with the suffering inflicted by others in view of living a life of universal love<sup>3</sup>.

The word asceticism was taken into Christian usage from the Greek by Clement of Alexandria and Origen and it generally meant in Catholic writings the deliberate and persevering endeavour of the Christian to attain Christian perfection. But since in the actual practice of striving after perfection a Christian is confronted with very many obstacles such as the conflict between the physical and the spiritual, disintergration of inner forces and effort, concupiscence, the sinful influence of the world around etc. it necessarily means a painful struggle, self-denial and renunciation.

Due to the dualistic conception of man asceticism was considered, especially in the European cultural context, to be a means of transition from the sensible to the spiritual, from appearance to truth, from the temporal to the eternal. Asceticism has been defined in Christian literature as methodical effort to suppress the lower impulses of human nature by gradually realizing spiritual perfection. This thought exercised a deep and lasting influence on the Christian asceticism which was bound up with the mysticism of the Cross. The anonymous author of the "The Cloud of Unknowing" advised his disciple even to empty every thought and image from his mind, but fill it with faith, while St. John of the Cross recommended a radical detachment from everything. For a soul that seeks to enter the Divine union should be free from all desires, however slight they may be<sup>4</sup>. The killing of the desires of the senses was understood as being crucified with Christ.

### **Types of Asceticism**

The main purpose of ascetic acts, as we see it in the Christian literature is twofold: attainment of moral per-

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3. Mary John, *A Study of Tirukkural*, In: *In Christo*, Vol.26, Nr.4, October 1988, pp 171-175.
  4. Fr. Joseph Dinh Duc Dao, *Inculturation: The Case of Zen Meditation*, in: *In Christo*, Vol. 26, Nr. 4, 1988, P. 188,

fection and mystical union. Correspondingly we have moral and mystical asceticism. Along with these two there is also a Church tradition of cultic asceticism, which is concerned with abstinence and various other acts. These are considered to be necessary as preparatory to participation in the mysteries of divine service. They are meant to purify the sinful man before his meeting with the all holy God.

### Moral Asceticism

The moral asceticism is traditionally viewed from two angles. The negative aspect of moral asceticism concerns man's conversion, the turning away from evil, from sinful inclinations and desires and overcoming the threefold lusts: the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and the pride of life, the consequences of original sin (1 Jn. 2: 16). Positively it implies a loving turning towards God and one's neighbour, the practice of moral principles and virtues, restoration of the sin-disturbed inner order, and the dominance of the personal spirit and self-less love.

We will have to admit that the above description of moral asceticism is the common Christian conception. Such a concept of asceticism enables one easily to defend the asceticism as practised in the Christian religion. Then nobody can dispute the fact that man's spiritual life is constantly threatened by the forces of evil and that every man ought to fight against them by strict discipline and self-mastery. What is essential in the above understanding of asceticism is the fact that it is regarded as a pure means for a moral self-discipline with a view to attaining an undisturbed harmony between the different forces in man. Karl Rahner calls it a 'bourgeois-Christian conception of asceticism'<sup>5</sup>. Here we see more of an anthropocentric rather than a Theocentric conception of asceticism.

The question we have to ask here is whether the

5. K. Rahner, "The Passion and Asceticism", in: *Theological Investigation*, Vol. 3, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1967, P. 60.

moral asceticism represents for us the properly Christian asceticism. One thing we have to keep in mind at the very outset is that here there is no question of minimising the importance of moral asceticism for the Christian life, whose duties after all also include the natural moral law. It is important for a Christian even for the attainment of his eternal salvation. It is also true that the Christian faith confesses that in the long run even this moral asceticism can be achieved in all its fullness by man only with the helping and healing grace of God. Nevertheless this moral asceticism is, according to Rahner, not yet the real central point of that asceticism which has actually been cultivated by the Christian religion<sup>6</sup>.

If we were to admit that the moral ascetic practices from the central point of Christian asceticism we will be naturally subject to painful helplessness and to false interpretation in justifying the 'feats' and 'excesses' to be found in the history of Christianity. The severe ascetic life of certain saints in Christianity can no longer be explained in its radicalism simply as an attempt to preserve and develop the noble spiritual dispositions against the pressure of an otherwise overpowering sensuality. We must either regard such things as pious follies and private exaggerations, or trace them back to influences of a general spiritual history which really have nothing to do with the nature of Christianity or, because these explanations do not do justice to Christian asceticism, we must honestly concede that what is in fact lived as Christian asceticism cannot be reduced to a common denominator of moral asceticism but demands a different interpretation of its meaning. Besides, it is perfectly possible to justify moral asceticism independently of Christian belief. Then the fact of man's threatened condition on the natural moral plane is an object of human experience even independently of faith.

Before we go to look into the specifically Christian character of asceticism we will have to look at the other

two types of asceticism which are to be found in the history of religions and which must not be simply identified with Christian asceticism.

### Ritual Asceticism

Ritual asceticism which is found in almost all religions is connected with worship and man's preparation for it. It makes man sacral, withdrawn from the profane, and in communication with the Divine. The principle behind this ascetic demand is that nothing profane should approach God who is all holy. So in many religions there are very stringent ascetic prescriptions which are required for qualifying man to enter into contact with the God-head in the ritual sacrifice: fasting, sexual abstinence, vigils, ablutions etc. Such ascetic practices can be found also in the Old Testament, particularly in connection with the great feasts and sacrificial worship. However the Old Testament Prophets already gave warnings against excessive emphasis on this kind of asceticism and stressed its inner meaning.

Ritual asceticism, as described above, plays no great role in the modern Christian life. But there is also a cultic asceticism in a wider sense, when some self-denial or other exercises are undertaken to make reparation and penance, or express one's dedication to God and therefore have the character of a sacrifice. The deepest sense of this ascetic practice lies in the recognition that God is absolute and holy and supreme Lord of man and all creation, from whom we implore forgiveness, to whom we make a concrete act of dedication. This type of asceticism will always be there.

### Mystical Asceticism

In the history of religions we see that various ascetic practices are meant to be a preparation and means for religious enthusiasm or mysticism. Through these practices the ascetics hope for a mysterious experience of the divine. According to Karl Rahner, asceticism here is not merely some sort of moral perfecting of man by which he renders himself ethically so pleasing to God

that God gives himself to man as grace in a mystical experience, but explicitly or at least implicitly the connection between asceticism and mysticism is established directly. Here asceticism already establishes the possibility of mysticism by the very psychological condition called forth by it. The self-emptying, the being dead to the world etc. are direct means of being filled with the divine, of the rise of the unbounded light of the Godhead in the soul. Asceticism is thus in this form the liberation of the divine in man. Such a mystical asceticism, however, contradicts the Christian message of the truly divine life which is given to man gratuitously by God out of his sovereign free love<sup>7</sup>.

### Faith, the fundamental christian asceticism

This fundamental Christian asceticism is undoubtedly a gratuitous gift of God. The acceptance of the grace of faith, this yes to God's call has to be given not merely on certain occasions but every day. This constant alertness to respond to God demands a lot of self-denial and asceticism. In faith man accepts the mystery of God which for him is ununderstandable; he surrenders himself trustingly to God without seeing what he has been promised. A man of faith builds his life not on himself but on God. This, however, is not an easy task. For man has the basic inclination to understand himself in terms of himself, to plan for himself and for his future, to lay hold of life and to make it secure. This has been the temptation of our first Parents. If they succumbed to this temptation, the threat is still greater for the fallen man who is beset with his lusts.

The constant challenge to man today is, guided by faith, to fight against himself, his own secret egoisms. This is the very basis of Christian asceticism. We could call it the asceticism of faith, the exercise of self-surrender to God whose ways are hidden from us. This total self-abandonment to God enables one to accept cheerfully whatever comes from the loving designs of God. A man of true faith does not substitute the crosses given to

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7. *Ibdem.* P. 66 67

him by God in the course of his life by the little sacrifices of his own choice.

The total surrender of man in faith to God demands that he accepts his own self, his own limitations, weaknesses and inadequacies, the sorrows, disappointments and frustrations of life, and finally his own death. It demands from him that he constantly resists the temptations to doubt, despair and revolt. In complying with all these demands he does not feel that he is performing something extraordinary which gives him certain claims, as would be the case in the practice of certain penances. This asceticism of faith is the true obedience of faith. Jesus' whole life was characterized by this obedience. A truly Christian asceticism has to find its source in this loving obedience of Jesus to his heavenly Father. Jesus' whole life was His asceticism which found its climax on the Cross. Therefore all Christian asceticism must be, at its deepest level, participation in Christ's asceticism. In other words, the true meaning of Christian asceticism is to be sought in the imitation of Christ rather than in the isolated acts freely chosen by individuals or communities. These isolated exercises become meaningful only in so far as they are the concrete instances of the following of Christ.

### **Imitation of Christ**

According to the New Testament, imitation of Christ begins with the acceptance of one's vocation by which Christ receives one into the community of His own life and destiny and makes one His disciple. 'Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men' (Mt. 1:17). If a man positively responds to the initial invitation, Jesus leads him step by step into the mystery of His own person and shares with him His own mission. 'Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road.' (Lk 10:3.4)

Through baptism the Christian is taken up into the death and resurrection of Christ. St. Paul asks the Romans: 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized

into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death' (Rom 6:3)? Jesus Christ is present in the baptized person. St. Paul tells the Galatians: I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I live now in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2: 20). In the presence and action of Christ in the Christian Christ becomes someone who can be experienced. He is so present within the Christian that by entering into himself he can make out whether his ways are in keeping with those of Christ or not. 'Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? unless indeed you fail to meet the test' (Cor 13:5). A Christian will be true to his vocation in so far as he realizes this presence of Christ in himself and constantly orients himself to Christ. A Christian has to be transformed into Christ, thus follow Him and from this basic following imitate Him.

The demands Jesus makes on those who would like to imitate Him are unconditional and radical: 'And a scribe came up and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head'. Another of the disciples said to him, 'Lord, let me first go and bury my father'. But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead' (Mt. 8:19-22). In order to follow the master one has to offer his own life. Then Jesus told his disciples, 'if any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' (Mt. 16:24-25).

In the later history of Christian life, however, we notice a shift of emphasis in the idea of imitation of Christ. It is understood as the following of the earthly life of Christ which finds its climax in martyrdom. Later on when martyrdom became rare asceticism and monastic life, which were considered to be a protracted martyrdom, were

considered to be the sure means of imitation of Christ. Ascetic practices which were natural consequences of following Christ became gradually an end in themselves. In the place of the difficulties and hardships which constantly accompany a true Christian life, individual and communal penances were held 'in high esteem. These ascetic practices could provide the believer with a sense of satisfaction for having accomplished something for his own eternal salvation; whereas the demands of daily Christian living were not easily perceptible and rarely spectacular.

Today, however, we are becoming more and more aware of the dangers of substituting the crosses given us by God in the course of our daily Christian living through the self-imposed sacrifices. One danger could be the growth of one's own ego behind the mask of many sacrifices, which hinders us from true service to man. So the present day man has to find meaningful forms of asceticism. For such an effort the point of departure could be a very important anthropological thought of Martin Buber. According to him, a man can truly understand and love only that which he does not possess, which releases its own being. He can relate himself actually to something which is left in its own autonomy and to the laws of its own inner nature<sup>8</sup>.

This is very true of interpersonal relationships. When I, so to say, possess other persons, when I make them an extension of my own ego, when I do not want them to find their own future and arrive at their own personal fulfilment I reify them and make them the object of my own interest. A consumer culture like ours is characterized by such relationships among people. Each one is looking for maximum profit from any relationship. But we know that a profit-oriented relationship cannot be truly personal, much less Christian. So in order to establish proper and truly Christian relationship we need to practise a lot of asceticism; an asceticism which may take different forms than we have been so far accustomed to practise.

8. G. Scherer, Askese, loc. cit. P. 31

Today to be a true follower of Christ a Christian has to learn to master the demands of his own personal needs and impulses, his desires for power and possessions etc., and to deny himself some of its fulfilment. Further, it is imperative today that a Christian makes a strict choice which enables him meaningfully to regulate the many consumer supplies. It demands from him the power to withstand the ever-increasing desire to possess consumer goods. A Christian has to learn to withdraw himself at times from the hustle and bustle of his daily life, and from the demands of the hectic and performance-oriented society in order to reflect over the mystery of his being and total dependence on God. These are demands which make a continuous claim on the life of a disciple of Christ. He cannot rest content with occasional, isolated acts of penance which he might freely undertake.

In the participation of Christ's love for human beings a follower of Christ cannot rest as long as there exists in the world such a great difference in the distribution of the goods of this world which are necessary for human existence. He feels ill-at-ease in the presence of the de-humanizing misery of which the Second Vatican Council speaks in its Constitution: Church in the Modern World. The greater part of the world is in a state of such poverty that it is as if Christ himself were crying out by the mouths of these poor people to the sense of justice of his disciples. It goes on to remind us not to be guilty of the scandal of enjoying an abundance of riches, while others lack the necessities of life and are tortured by hunger, disease, and all kinds of misery (Art. 88). The magnitude of misery that exists in the world today and the fact that the common good today is universal (Gs 26) and all people are our neighbours (Gs 27) will force the true follower of Jesus to renounce many of his possessions and all that are connected with it: earthly powers, life-security, prestige, glory etc. Poverty due to circumstances can make one greedy or resigned. But if one chooses to be poor following the example of Christ it needs a lot of ascetical spirit.

Thus we see that all genuine Christian asceticism must be, at its deepest level, participation in Christ's asceticism that is, an asceticism of the Cross. Christ's asceticism of the Cross began not from the palace of the Roman Governor but from the crib of Bethlehem. So the Cross of Christ, which is basic to Christian life, appears in the everyday life of a Christian. The acceptance of these crosses in obedience to faith and love should form the bulk of Christian asceticism.

Cross is not merely a symbol of ascetic life. We should also remember that cross was a form of execution, that is to say, it means the violent death of an innocent person. Here one does not die a natural death but a death that is the consequence of his engagements in the cause of God, which is the proclamation of the Gospel to the poor (Lk 4:18). The followers of Christ are not spared from carrying such crosses. One who imitates Jesus in his engagements for the cause of God and takes his mission seriously, must also be prepared to face the same fate, that is, the violent death (Mt. 10:37-39).

True following of Christ makes one different from the rest. His life cannot simply be identical with the common life in the world. It must harbour something of that dynamic power which opens up the present to the future and the world to the kingdom of God. Here the Christian comes very often in conflict with the world in so far as the world is not yet the kingdom of God. This conflict will bring along with it a host of problems and hardships. It can even be fatal, as is evidenced by the long list of modern Martyrs, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Maximilian Kolbe, Martin Luther King, Archbishop Oscar Romero and others.<sup>9</sup> The lives of these great men are a constant reminder to us that martyrdom, which is the culmination of the following of Christ, is a possibility even today, if one takes one's Christian existence seriously".

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9. Anton Rotzeter, *Leidenschaft fur Gottes Welt*, Benziger, Zurich 1988, P. 36.

## Conclusion

We have tried to show that asceticism is a common phenomenon found in all religions. The emphasis which certain ascetic practices have depends on the world-view of a particular religion.

Due to a defective anthropology traditional Catholic view placed the main emphasis on moral asceticism. But today there is an increasing awareness of the great dangers of such an asceticism, and of the need for making efforts towards a theological and spiritual deepening of it. This theological and spiritual depth can be found only if asceticism springs from the loving imitation of Christ in faith. A life that is lived in loving obedience will demand a continuous self-denial and self-mastery. It will also, at the same time, enable one to be at the service of one's fellow-men.

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## Critique of Hedonism

The contemporary world is sometimes censoriously characterized as a pleasure-seeking world. Many ask why it should not seek pleasure. Has the world not a basic right to it? Is it not that makes life worth living? Our forbears might have had very little notion of humankind's fundamental right to pleasure. Out of ignorance they might have looked askance at pleasure and pleasure-seeking in every form. While we may forgive their ignorance, we cannot concede them innocence, so the argument goes. This attitude is nothing short of the heresy of hedonism which we vehemently reject for various reasons.

1) Self-discipline is an indispensable virtue although it has a harsh sound in many an ear. We have as it were succeeded in banishing this word from day-to-day life and relegating it to armies and the like. That armies should have discipline is evident enough, for an efficient army is unthinkable without it. But we can hardly thus limit its range. War is scarcely the only use for discipline. Whenever and wherever a particular goal is to be achieved, the means towards it are to be organized and regulated. And this is exactly what discipline means. It implies a system, a scheme, an ordered train of action.

We are aware of all that goes into the training of an athlete. He goes through a rigid regime of food and exercise for achieving the requisite strength and endurance in view of a competition. The mountaineer performs the greatest feats of endurance, suffering wind and cold, rain and storm, out of pure love of achievement. The woman of fashion undergoes fasts such as no confessor would impose upon a penitent, purely to preserve her

figure. Moral discipline is similar. It is training, not however of muscles, to throw weight or run hundred metres, but of our whole nature so as to be successful in the race of life leading to eternity.

Its strength and weakness are precisely here. Its weakness consists in this that moral perfection is a remote ideal having little value in the economic sense. And the world is skeptical about any ultimate end. Hence it is far from commanding and compelling. Efforts to speak of the beauty of moral life and of living up to the highest in us may carry little conviction.

Contrariwise, the goal of the athlete is there for everybody to see. It is obvious and palpable. It is present, immediate, compelling and its value can be measured in terms of immediate gain.

Given a transcendent aim for human life, we see the need for self-discipline. As rational creatures we can hardly approach our transcendent finality without self-discipline. We cannot let ourselves drift aimlessly. We have to take firm hold of the helm and steer through rough weather. We have to shape our lives in accordance with our duties and obligations. We need discipline.

A parent or a drill-master may train a person to a definite mode of action. But in self-discipline the person himself is his own trainer. He cannot be moulded as clay can be by the sculptor. He himself has to do the work.

2) It is precisely in the rational control over instinctive powers that a human being rises above animals. Discipline is essential to a life that is rightly lived. If we do not set limits to our urges, we shall never learn to leave what is less important but very attractive in favour of what is more important but less attractive. Without discipline we can never triumph over the beast that is in us, over the law in our members that fights against the law of the spirit. A life of barren, materialistic over-indulgence blunts all that is exalted and noble. When a Man follows merely his animal instincts, he lowers himself to the level of the brute.

3) There is a hierarchy of values. There are everyday values that pertain to our physical life; above them are the values of our vocation and our work; still higher are those of intellectual activity and personal relations; and finally come the values that concern our relation to God. We realize these values through the powers of our being that are limited and hence must understand clearly to which of these values to turn. We must choose for the higher values in the situation and this requires discipline.

The physical urges which proceed from the somato-psychic organization of Man present themselves so plainly to our consciousness that the mental and spiritual urges can easily be overlooked. But these, as a matter of fact, are more decisive from the point of view of our total good. The building up of our personality as well as its activity and creativity are based upon mental and spiritual urges. Therefore constant discipline is called for.

4) Discipline is no more than the death to self, the self-giving which is demanded of a mature person if he is to live happily with others. It is paradoxical but true. In order to come to self-fulfilment, we must give up concentrating on it and searching for it; in order to be happy we must not think of our own happiness but rather that of others.

If a person wishes to obtain from life the precious gifts it can bestow, he must know that it is only by renouncing a lesser good that he can have the greater. The meaning of life does not consist in enjoying one's sensations and powers, but in fulfilling the task assigned to us by providence. Man lives truly and fully when he knows his responsibility, carries it out in terms of meeting the legitimate needs of the persons entrusted to him. For this there is need of constant effort to transcend one's own wishes and meet one's obligations.

5) Discipline well expresses love. It was their burning love for Christ which impelled the saints to suffer with him and for him. We marvel at the severity of the saints against themselves, but our wonder is tinged with sadness

and regret that our own hearts are so cold and insensible to divine love. We look on from afar while they have found and embraced the secret of happiness. We hold back in our cowardice while they have made the grand venture of faith and given up all things to find Christ. They have found the pearl of great price and have sold all their possessions to buy it. The earthly lover in the service of his beloved embraces toil and dangers in order to prove his love. Sacrifice and suffering are the very language of love. Some are ready to smile at the lover's extravagances, but, after all, there is wisdom in his folly, and he has found in the self-forgetfulness of love a secret source of joy. Why should we wonder then that the overpowering love of God that filled to overflowing the hearts of the saints should sometimes express itself in a way of which the world does not approve? Love often knows no measure, but is inflamed above measure. Love feels no burden, and willingly does more than it can and scarcely pleads impossibility.

6) At times we are called by Christ to lay aside our comforts, to risk our emotional well-being, indeed to lay down our very lives, if necessary, for the cause of justice and love. The one thing necessary of which Our Lord himself spoke for the attainment of salvation (Lk 10:42) demands that a Christian shall under certain circumstances renounce earthly ease and pleasure for the sake of the Kingdom. Thoughts of death and the transient nature of all temporal things, of which the Scriptures constantly remind us, will permit no Christian to give himself up completely to this life on earth. The Christian religion centres around the Crucified One, puts a certain reserve on enthusiasm for the possessions of this world. The doctrine of original sin teaches us to distrust the world glamour, with its pride and distractions.

Christ calls us to resurrection through the cross. He reminds us not to forget the claims of the spirit (Lk 10:42) in our preoccupation with the cares of daily life. When necessary, we are to pluck out our eye or cut off our right hand rather than suffer the whole body to go into

hell (Mt 5: 29-30). He requires us to deny ourselves (Lk 9:23). The Apostle Paul writes: "I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor 9:27).

7) No philosopher or theologian ever propounded the theory that unbridled pleasure or pleasure-seeking is the supreme motive of human life or Man's greatest good. Even for Aristippus and Eudoxus, even for Epicurus, it was ordered pleasure which in their eyes constituted the chief good of Man, and that as a counter-balance to suffering and pain. They too fully realized the priority and superiority of the pleasures of the spirit.

All of the great revolutionaries were Men of sacrifice, Men who were willing to become victims for the good of others. To accomplish anything worthwhile, one does have to be a victim. A good mother endures untold sacrifices for the sake of her family. To characterize such nobility as self-destructive, meaningless or wasteful is, to say the least, absurd.

8) Discipline atones for our sins. It is necessary for redressing the harm done by our sins. We can distinguish in sin the guilt and the disturbance of the moral order. A child, for example, who has been naughty, asks pardon from his parents. He is at once forgiven, but, sometimes at least, he will be punished for the purpose of re-establishing justice. Or a Man betrays the trust a friend has reposed in him and robs him. If afterwards he asks for forgiveness, he will do two things: he will express his sorrow for his betrayal and will also promise to restore the money he has taken. Our sins not only offend God, but also disturb the moral order. When we truly repent, he restores us at once to his friendship, but it may only be after a long time that the disturbed order is restored.

If it be asked why God, all rich, eternal, all-perfect should seek for satisfaction from such puny creatures as human beings, the answer is that God rules the universe with justice and his wisdom requires that

the demands of justice be satisfied. Sin deserves satisfaction and something would be wanting to the perfect order which God loves, if it were not atoned for by discipline and penance.

9) Discipline atones also for the sins of others. Human-kind forms one family. Through our mutual relationship with Christ we are brethren of one another in addition to the natural tie of a common humanity. We cannot disown our share in the sinfulness of the human community. It is then surely a just and natural instinct that led the saints to do penance, not only for their own faults but also for the sins of others.

10) Discipline deals a death blow to selfishness, the arch-enemy of love. When we find we are using God's creatures not for His honour and glory but for our own, when we seize upon things or people for our own pride, profit and pleasure, there is selfishness. When we allow a creature to compete with God for the possession of our hearts, when our love is divided between God and anything that is not God, there is selfishness.

We cannot use created things for the glory of God and for the good of others unless we are in control of ourselves. We cannot be in control of ourselves if we are under the power of our desires, appetites and passions. We cannot give ourselves to God and to others if we do not belong to ourselves. And we cannot belong to ourselves if we belong to creatures. Discipline is meant to prevent us from being enslaved to creatures.

11) If we insist upon enjoying what is 'allowed' to the very last boundary line of the 'thou-shalt-not', we are almost certain to fall. Not the first time, perhaps, and not every time, but in the long run and in most cases. To live a life with God is possible only if innocent things, too, are, at least once in a way, forgone. Our heart is too easily enamoured of God's creatures. Their powerful charm casts its spell on us. We can easily be ensnared by them if we are not on our guard by means of discipline.

12) Harm can come to the person even from the world that is incorrupt. Things in themselves true, beautiful and good can render his approach to God much harder because being partially corrupt himself, he is inclined to attach himself inordinately to truth, goodness and beauty.

Christian use of the world, therefore, presupposes Christian control of human powers. The more profound the control, the less will one inordinately tie himself to the truth, goodness and beauty of things; the more easily will he shut himself off from the influence of the corrupt world, the more free will he be in the use of the world.

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# Critique of Rigourism

Rigourism is strict conformity to form or to the letter of the law and rigidity in style of living. Unlike hedonism, rigourist movements have rarely crystallized into a philosophic system, but have rather remained as attitudes exercising a direct influence upon the mores of peoples.

## A. Asceticism and ascetical practices

True asceticism, writes Thomas Merton<sup>1</sup> is more than legalistic strictness about keeping rules just for their own sake. This concept of asceticism, while it had a value once, has lost its meaning today. Without going into the question whether this shows that the people of our time are better or worse than people of other times, the fact is that the kind of penitential discipline in terms of a series of formal and rigid little observances has ceased to have any meaning to modern people.

We still have in our communities many excellent people who have been formed by this kind of practices and we admire them; but we also have people who have been broken and twisted and distorted by it. We instinctively feel that they have not come to the consecrated life just to be deformed in this particular kind of way, and therefore this dehumanizing concept of asceticism is insufficient. It hardly accords with the NT idea of asceticism. It is a limited one, very demanding sometimes within a small area but not really going very deep. It is external and, in a certain sense, it is easier; it can be a kind of

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1. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Garden City, New York, 1971, pp. 390-391

evasion of the real asceticism of giving up ourselves. Far from being real self-sacrifice, it can only be will-training. Purifying though it be up to a point, it can leave intact the inmost ego, and a person can be really strict in this kind of asceticism and remain very proud and harsh and extremely uncharitable. A cruel, aggressive and vindictive kind of person can flourish on this kind of asceticism.

The superior value of interior over exterior asceticism can be seen from a comparison of the virtues they generate. Whereas outward asceticism promotes discipline, interior asceticism promotes humility and charity. Interior asceticism is not seen by other people; it does not cater to complacence. One may be proud, for instance, of having refused a favourite dish, but will hardly be proud of having exploded a day-dream or stifled a curiosity.

Sanctity is an interior and not an exterior quality. It is a matter of the soul's desire, a matter of interior disposition. It is a fusion of grace and correspondence, a matter of union between the human and the divine will. Thus since the outward act springs from the inward attitude, the essential purification must relate to the latter. The mind and the heart must be mortified if they are to produce mortified acts<sup>2</sup>.

Yet over the recent centuries there has been too much legalism in our approach to asceticism. Instead of striving to remove obstacles to our union with God and brethren by being generous with acts of love, thus overcoming our self-centredness, we have often been satisfied with observing the letter of the law. Many of us have abstained from meat just because it was a law. And we have tended to use every trick available to duck duty. At the other extreme, we have felt 'what a good person I am' because we kept letter-perfect all basic legalistic requirements.

Those who resort to exterior penances seldom make full use of the more important facilities for virtue in daily

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2. Hubert van Zeller, *Approach to Prayer and Approach to Penance*  
New York, 1966, pp. 128-129

life. We choose to do something extraordinary when so many ordinary obligations are being ignored, unfulfilled or done half-heartedly. We were 'straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel' as we kept Friday and Lent perfectly, but practised and promoted sinful division around us.

There is a great deal of asceticism in community life itself, the daily association of temperaments and dispositions so foreign to each other. The charity required for peaceful coexistence is of an ineffably higher order than the spirit needed for corporeal penances which so easily encourage delusions and generate misguided zeal.

Sickness is a great form of penance which few have the mental acumen to turn to profit. In time of sickness there is a great danger that it will be used to concentrate on one's own miseries. When this is done the miseries are magnified and last longer than they normally would.

A large place should be given to mortification which is not artificial, which arise, for example, from productive and sometimes exhaustive work. Many are the occasions for self-renunciation in order to help the community to live and courageously to pay the price of sin: 'Thou shalt labour by the sweat of thy brow.' We must learn by means of little, intelligent, generous efforts to struggle against slackness and sensuality. It is impossible to make a list of all these mortifications; they are infinite in number, because infinitely small. There is laziness to be shaken off, and love of ease and comfort, cajoling oneself to get up at once at fixed times, not putting things off till tomorrow, accepting the fatigue of household duties, finishing the task undertaken before starting another.

We may mortify the judgement by allowing the possibility that others may be right and desisting from the acrimonious defence of our own opinion. We may allow others to have the merit of a good act we have done and be content to remain in the background. We may love to be hidden and unknown, as was our Lord. We may make our gifts anonymously and not look for

gratitude or affection in return for what we do. We may mortify the will by obedience, by forgiveness of injuries, by patience under unjust accusations or unkind criticisms, by putting up with the faults of others and even with our own weaknesses. By waiving one's own opinion and judgment to comply with other people's wishes instead of imposing upon them one's own — that is the sort of thing that touches our real ego.

Of the two questions: 'What will I give up for Lent — smoking, food, drinks, shows?' and 'What shall I do to free myself from self-centredness, from greedy pursuit of pleasures, from coldness and harshness towards others, from grudging service in the cause of Christ, the latter is much more important. Then the deprivation we might accept — loss of sleep because we visited the sick, for example, become acts of love. And instead of searching for many gifts — helpful to good causes though they are — we work at self-giving to our neighbours.

What has been said above should not be interpreted as ridiculing all penitential practices. In the words of Thomas Merton, throwing away all these practices and living in a kind of freedom of spirit without any real discipline is fatal<sup>3</sup>. No good can come out of this policy. It will only destroy consecrated life. The freedom that we are looking for is never a kind of mere spontaneous following of natural tendencies, innocent natural feelings, and so forth. This idea of mere personal fulfilment, a more or less natural fulfilment of spontaneous good instincts and desires, is hardly good enough. If real charity is present, certainly this will do an enormous amount of good, but we can't have this real charity without real self-denial. Relationships without self-denial turn out to be mere gregariousness and vapid togetherness.

Basically there is only one Christian freedom, which is the freedom of the cross. It is the freedom that comes to one who has completely given himself with Christ on

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3. Thomas Merton, *op. cit.*, pp. 391-394

the cross, has risen with Christ and has his freedom not simply in ordinary human spontaneity but in the spontaneity of the Spirit of God, who is given to us in exchange for our own spirit when and if we die on the cross with Christ. In our consecrated life there is the element of a real death to the world, to the ordinary life that we would otherwise be living as Christians. Our life as consecrated persons does imply a real break and therefore a real liberation, by a kind of death from the claims and demands of a highly distracted and confused life in the world, although this, of course, may have a few Christian dimensions of its own. It might even be more Christian than our life in certain circumstances. Yet the fact remains that in response to the call of God we have made a real break with the whole network of needs, servitudes and demands which secular life imposes on people. There is no real freedom in our life without this death and resurrection, without this clean break.

We come to the consecrated life to surrender ourselves to Christ and to his Spirit in a kind of death, in order to live again a life which he gives us. The freedom that we seek in our life is the freedom to be open to the new life which comes from Christ, the freedom to follow his Spirit. We seek a freedom to follow the bridegroom wherever he goes, to be attentive to his every inspiration and to listen to the personal message that he has for us. This can come to us from no other source except from him speaking in our hearts. Consecrated life is aimed precisely to protect this inner atmosphere of silence, listening and freedom in which Christ can help us do the work he wishes to do.

The great austeries practised by some saints seem to hostile critics revolting and almost suicidal. It is necessary always to consider the conditions of time and place, and is not wise to judge them by modern standards. Desperate diseases need desperate remedies. If anyone dips into the literature of primitive times he will be appalled at the depths of corruption to which had descended the mighty Roman Empire, fast rushing to its

ruin. The immorality that reigned unchecked was simply indescribable. In such a situation, to fly to the desert and practise penance was almost necessary for salvation. So some Christians adopted severe penances.

A striking protest was necessary against the mad rush for pleasure and debauchery that disgraced the age, and in the providence of God that protest was supplied by the holy mortified lives of the monks. Similar considerations would in their measure apply to other periods in the Church's history marked by a special intensity of ascetical practices. Indeed, at every time in history there has been need for protest against luxury and self-indulgence, and Almighty God has never failed to raise up holy men and women who by their penitential lives were both an example and a rebuke to the world.

But although we readily admit that there have been isolated cases in which mortification and penance have been carried to excess, we do not admit such excess to have been general or common. The tradition of the Church has always held prudence in the very highest esteem, and by it regulated penance and fasting. Each had to discover what was best for himself according to age, temperament and health. Work was prescribed to all, and if fasting rendered them unable to work they were to give up the fasting rather than the work. They were not to subject themselves to privations that would lead to depression or inability to pray. Such regulation of asceticism by the duties of one's life is surely the very essence of prudence and moderation. Another safeguard was the subjection of penance to obedience. Extravagant penance has doubtless been adopted by solitaries, but the Church has always discouraged those who would be a law to themselves, and sought to bring them under rule or at least under obedience to a spiritual director.

Everyone is bound to preserve his life by ordinary and customary means. As a rule, however, a Man is not bound to adopt extraordinary means for this purpose.

Thus he would not be bound to preserve health at such great pecuniary expense as would leave his dependents in dire poverty. On the other hand, one may, for a sufficient reason, do a good act even though it may endanger life or shorten it by some years. Thus, to gain a livelihood one may engage in dangerous or unhealthy occupations such as glass-blowing, mining, etc. To promote scientific knowledge one may engage in dangerous expeditions, e.g., to the Polar Regions. Out of charity one may nurse those afflicted with an infectious disease, even though there be a grave danger of contracting it. Man's purpose in the world is not merely to live as long as he can. If he may to some extent shorten his life for science, gain, glory, or his country's honour, why may he not do so for the purpose of gaining self-control or doing penance for his sins? But no one may do penance with serious risk to life. The humility and sensitiveness to sin which characterized the saints sometimes led them to confess themselves to be in fault in this respect. St. Bernard in later life regretted his earlier austerities as excessive, so also did St. John Baptist de Rossi. But why should the world's indignation be reserved for the few who have, perhaps, gone to excess in self-denial, and not rather be directed towards the large numbers who are unduly self-indulgent? Doctors tell us that most men dig their graves with their teeth. Many, with their eyes wide open, shorten their lives by intemperance. But, after all, it is, in fact, very difficult to find evidence that many lives have been shortened by indiscreet penance. St. Bernard, whom we have just mentioned, lived to the age of 62, and St. John Baptist de Rossi to 66.

### B. Asceticism and the spirituality of self-denial

Many people have a quite negative concept of asceticism as if it consisted in continual self-renunciation, as if God wanted to hold us down, rather than that we should live fully our lives.

- 1) It is God who gave us life and he surely wants it to

flourish and bear fruit. We do not deny that Christianity imposes a certain renunciation. Jesus spoke of the husbandman who prunes his vine so that it may bear more fruit. The purpose of pruning is not to restrict life, but on the contrary to promote its fuller and richer flow.

2) The *agere contra* spirituality is unacceptable. In the words of Bernard Häring<sup>4</sup>, it is an error to represent the ideal of moral life as a persistent and toilsome struggle, a counterattack against evil in the sense of the *agere contra*. The painful wrestling with evil is obviously a result of original sin and of our own moral imperfection in the beginning of the life of perfection, but it should be viewed as a necessary transitional stage of moral development rather than as the valid measure of true worth. An act as such has worth in proportion to its power to harness all available energies of the will and contribute to greater enrichment of the entire person. But the personal value which enables the act manifests itself in it all the greater, the more the moral act springs from the perfection of the whole person. The worth of a particular act will be reckoned all the greater the more completely it belongs to the whole person, the deeper and richer the permanent moral source from which it springs. The valid criterion is the degree of love from which the act flows and not from the intensity of self-denial and struggle. To take the example of the chaste act: under certain circumstances an act of chastity which is the result of a decisive victory after desperate struggle may prove to the individual concerned the realization of a supreme triumph of virtue. But his effort, no matter how noble, does not possess the same deep intense chastity as the act of a thoroughly and perfectly chaste person, e. g., the Virgin Mother of God. If for no other reason than that he does not possess the same deep realization and intimate grasp of the excellence of chastity, he cannot give to the virtue the same fervent and profound approval. Therefore chastity flowing from a heart that is profoundly chaste and not constrained to wrestle

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4. Bernard Haring, *The Law of Christ I*, pp. 70-71

with temptation, by comparison with chastity resulting from the painful struggle with lust, absolutely speaking, is more excellent in moral worth. But it must also be borne in mind that the valient combat for virtue has its special merit.

3) True asceticism does not demand that we always choose the "more difficult". The more difficult need not always be the more perfect. Many people equate moral life with effort. For them merit is measured by the pain they experience in fulfilling their duty. The more it costs, the more moral it is. We had better cast out once and for all the pattern of thinking that "whatever is hard to do or bear just must be the best". This outdated approach makes a virtue of difficulty. Any good theologian would grant that a claim to greater merit that is based on difficulty alone is a false claim. Wearing a hairshirt is more difficult, but it is not necessarily more virtuous. The belief that what is easier is by that fact less perfect than what is harder, is unfortunate. Influenced by this belief people abstain from doing things which they should do. Rather than performing an action, just because it is hard or easy, we should perform it as the right thing to do and hence the will of God. True asceticism accepts whatever God offers, be it easy or hard. And God our Father never offers us only hard things. It is never God's will that we acquire merit for heaven by enduring as much as possible in this world. What he wants us to do is that we associate ourselves with the liberating and redeeming activity of Christ by our life of love and service. In our life we will certainly be faced with sufferings which we have to bear with resignation. Yet we are not expected to endure any avoidable suffering that has no relationship to love.

4) Salvation is not escape from self, or the annihilation of the ego. It is the growth of the whole personality to its full stature, in which soul, mind, and body all develop along their own lines, not encroaching on one another but balancing one another. Our attachment to the past formation and reaction to a materialistic cult of the body,

lay us open to the sin of "angelism". The spirit is regarded as heavenly spirit chained in the vile prison of the flesh. Consequently the body, a dangerous enemy, merits only contempt and mortification. More subtly still, an aggressive hate of the body may disguise a morbid taste for suffering derived from an unconscious sexual urge. "Those who play at being angels end up as animals" says Pascal. Rightly does Thomas Merton state that we cannot divide Man's nature against itself without disastrous consequences<sup>5</sup>. If perfection is sought by annihilation of the outward Man and the absolute rejection of a material universe, what actually happens is that the two halves of Man's being break away from each other and start travelling roads of their own. And when the flesh becomes its own master, it ends by mastering the spirit. It is not rare for an ascetic to live his whole life as if he did not have a body. Much more common are the ones who punish themselves furiously for two or three years and then lose their morale, fall into despair, become hypocondriacs, obsessed with fancied need of their flesh and of their spirit.

5) The struggle against natural tendencies, as such, is in no way a sign of virtue. The reason for this struggle is important. Urges belong to the nature of Man, and operate in all forms and areas of life. They compose his store of energy. There exists in Man, anterior to all experience, a certain number of dispositions to act which form the basic reserve of energy and without this reserve the higher life is impossible. Instinct is at the beginning of all psychic life, and where there is no store of basic instinctive energies, no reserve of urges and desires, there can be no growth and blossoming forth of a higher life. We do well to recognize that a connection does exist between the higher and lower life of our spirit. So it is an error to try to situate our inner conflict there. Moral effort has its place in the growth and blossoming of the instincts toward unity of soul. The motive of true asceticism does not lie in the struggle to overcome the urges, but in the necessity

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5. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, London, 1951, pp. 80-81

of bringing them into the proper order. The order is determined by various considerations: the question of health, regard for other persons, our duties, our vocation and our work.

6) Jesus says, 'I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly'. So Man must live now fully, richly, divinely. Detachment does not mean that we love nothing but God; it means, rather, that we love everything in God; it does not mean that we learn to love creatures less and less. It means, rather, that we learn to love them more and more; but it means loving them in God, not apart from God. Detachment is not flight from the world nor a disinclination to creatures. It is, rather, a daring, solicitous, warmhearted, unselfish love of everything. Detachment does not mean that one loves nothing but God. In our efforts to become detached we must never destroy our love for anyone or anything. The only thing we ought to kill is selfishness. And it is the function of asceticism to do so.

7) Our Lord who spake of 'the one thing necessary' never once hinted at Manichean disdain of the body in his commandments and recommendations. In fact, as August Adam states, he expressly refrained from requiring his disciples the fasting and the severe ascetic practices, the total renunciation of joy, which in those days were looked upon as self-evident accompaniments of a sincere striving for religious perfection. Christianity rates highly the significance of the virtue of abstinence. Our Lord not only undertook a forty days fast in person, but also enjoined on Christians to take up the cross and follow him (Lk 9:23), to leave all earthly things behind if they wished to attain the kingdom of heaven. The only question is whether renunciation alone suffices for the attainment of moral perfection as the Manicheans claim. Our Lord decided this question unequivocally in his weighing up of the attitude of the Pharisees and the followers of John the Baptist. These sects upbraided Jesus and his followers for failure to fast as rigorously as they did (Mt 9:14). In his reply, Jesus does not deny the value

of fasting, but he rejects the idea that fasting is always the necessary preliminary or the highest proof of perfection. He sets his law of love against the law of self-abasement. Our Lord did not condemn the Baptist's life of self-denial, but he did not share it and he even tolerated the disparagement of those who mockingly called him "a glutton and wine-drinker" (Mt 10:19). So highly did he rate the value of love in the New Covenant that, despite his praise for John the Baptist, he added: "Yet he that is the lesser in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Mt 11:11).

Jesus' own delight in nature is only too obvious. He participates in the marriage feast at Cana and in Simon's banquet. He enjoys the artless play of children and takes the keenest interest in the way fishermen, farmers, shepherds, servants, and merchants live. He knows all about the struggles of the poor widow and the spendthrift prodigality of the rich man's son. There is absolutely no cramping narrowness about him. He is completely natural. Hence in certain circumstances the use of the good things of this world can be more commendable than the renunciation of them, because such use can engender a greater love than would renunciation. The greatest love can manifest itself in using things as well as in abstaining from them.

In conclusion, it is worth repeating that Christian asceticism is not merely an exercise of abnegation for the sake of abnegation. Neither is it a practice that will automatically result in personal sanctification of the individual by the mere fact that he has denied himself something. This concept of asceticism is an error that has continued too long in the formation of Christians and of consecrated persons. Abnegation is part of a total process; apart from that process, it has no value. God does not wish the suffering of Man. The element of suffering that enters into the process of creative discipline is merely a side-effect and not a goal. The Christian must not concentrate on the "value of suffering" as if suffering were that which is of value. Suffering is merely an element of the dialectic into which the whole person enters as a response

to the Spirit and to the challenge of identification with Jesus in his total self-giving.

### C. Asceticism and renunciation of all pleasures

For most human beings, pleasure is a word that evokes mixed feelings. On the one hand, it is associated with the idea of "good". On the other, most people would regard a life devoted to pleasure as a waste. Our positive reaction to the word is often hedged with misgivings. We fear that pleasure can lead a person into dangerous paths, make him forget his duties and obligations and even corrupt his spirit if it is not controlled. To some people it has a lascivious connotation. Pleasure, especially carnal pleasure, has been considered the main temptation of the devil.

Indeed no Man lives without pleasure. He can no more escape it than he can escape breathing. But it is curious that despite the ubiquity of pleasure — or perhaps because of it — we seldom philosophize about it; we are far more exercised by the problem of pain. Pain is a great enigma. It grates our philosophical nerves.

But whatever we do with the problem of pain, the problem of pleasure remains. The question 'why' ought to hover as perplexingly over the pleasures of eating and music as it does over the pains of cancer and starvation. That the question is seldom asked in the context of pleasure is understandable.. A person in pleasure seems less inclined to philosophy than a person in pain. But explaining our neglect of the question does not answer it.

#### a. Nature of pleasure

By pleasure we mean any satisfaction of an appetite whether of an intellectual or a sensible nature. A person is in a state of pleasure when the movements of his body flow freely, rhythmically, and in harmony with his surroundings. The bodily pleasure has succeeded in appropriating the name of pleasure, which in fact belongs to the whole family of pleasures, because most often we seek after it and all share it. Because bodily pleasure is more

familiar, people think that there is no other. But there is the pleasure of intelligence and affectivity. Joy is the term used to designate it.

Every creature is also a potential being; it finds its completion in the actuation of its potentiality. Whatever is in potentiality, as such, has the tendency to act; and it takes pleasure in its realization, if it be a sentient and cognitive being (ST I 11, 27, 3). Thus every pleasure is a rest, a stop of the movement, a satisfaction of the desire. This rest is not to be regarded only as the stop of a moving object which has attained its objective. It is in itself an activity. For pleasure is an immanent act, an actuation of the subject who finds in it his perfection. Pleasure demands possession, that is to say, presence, effective or affective union of the loving subject with the loved object. Without the operation that this union effects, there is no pleasure. In addition, the subject must be aware of this union. This is why beings not endowed with consciousness cannot feel pleasure.

To have a deeper understanding of pleasure, Moritz Schlick contrasts it with pain<sup>6</sup>. Both describe the quality of an individual's response to situations. When this response is positive and feeling flows outward, we speak of having pleasure. When the response is negative and there is no rhythmic flow of feeling, we describe the situation as painful or unpleasant. Pleasure and pain have a polar relationship, which is exemplified by the fact that the release from pain is invariably expressed as pleasure. And for the same reason, loss of pleasure leaves one in a painful state. A normal individual is never without some awareness of the state of his body. In response to the question: 'how are you', he will answer, 'I feel fine, poorly, good, or bad'. If he should say 'I feel nothing', it would be an admission of death. During all waking hours our feelings fluctuate along the pleasure-pain axis.

Some pains are associated with pleasure. There is a pleasure component in pain when it is associated with

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6. Moritz Schlick. *Problems of Ethics*, New York, 1962, pp. 122-142

ideas which are strongly coloured by pleasure. It has this colouring either because they relate to previous states that had joyful experiences or because they relate to future states which are pictured as joyful. To this sort belong all those in which an ugly object is cherished because cheerful memories are joined to it or because where for the same reason various unpleasant sensations lose their unpleasantness; even bad odours are sometimes valued.

It has in general not escaped the notice of the poets that experiences of 'suffering' are not wholly disagreeable, nor altogether painful. Considering the external mode of appearance of the effect, it is very significant that suffering and great joy have in common in their expression such pronounced phenomenon as *tears*. A Man weeps when he suffers, and tears come to his eyes when he experiences great joy.

Joy is different from pleasure in various ways. Joy supposes an inner harmony in the human person, whereas pleasure does not. The joyful individual is gifted with innocence, at least recovered, which is perhaps one reason why children typically experience far more joy than do most adults and why generous people enjoy an unspeakable peace. Joy arises from one's deep spirit, not from a single identifiable stimulation, while pleasure arises from a clear particular source: this joke, that music, this meal. Likewise the former affects one's whole being, the latter only one aspect of it. The one tends to be more enduring, the other is apt to be of short duration. There is an intellectual accent in one case, a sensual one in the other. Cessation from satiety is not possible in the first, but it is certain to follow in the second. Joy supposes a capacity to love, pleasure does not. Though one can experience the pleasures of sense, one who does not love knows no joy. He is not whole.

On the contrary, human experience would seem to testify that although joy is superior to pleasure from every viewpoint, pleasure is not infrequently more persuasive. One reason is that man is in more

immediate contact with sensible things than with the non-sensibles, and this engenders a more vehement and more frequent appetitive response. Furthermore, the bodily permutation of pleasure tends to highlight its presence. Lastly, inasmuch as bodily pleasures are remedies for contrary pains, which are corruptive of the senses, they possess a persuasive power unknown to joy, which has no sorrow which 'hurts' the intellectual power itself. For this last reason bodily pleasures are more appreciated in the remediying of the many daily afflictions and pains of life.

### b. Value of pleasure

#### i. Pleasure, the perfection of action

Here is a summary of St. Thomas' understanding in this regard as presented by Albert Plé<sup>7</sup>. Pleasure completes activity. The perfection imparted to action by pleasure is of the order of finality which means that pleasure itself is an object of desire. The whole question comes down to knowing how fittingly to situate this finality of pleasure in a morality based on the attractiveness of the Good. What is the end of moral action: good or pleasure?

St. Thomas notices that pleasure brings to action an extrinsic perfection which is of the order of formal cause. He means by this that pleasure gives it something specific. Indeed, for him, action finds its specificity in its object. This is its intrinsic specificity which constitutes it in its essence. But pleasure is like a complement of specificity. It is added to the constitutive essence of an action as a consequence of its good functioning.

The order of the perfection which pleasure imparts to action is above all that of final cause. Pleasure perfects action as an end which supervenes. To the good which is action comes in addition another good, pleasure, which implicates the rest of appetite in the possessed good. Pleasure

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7. Albert Ple, *Chastity and the Affective Life*, New York, 1966 pp. 76-88

being a good, it is normal for it to be desired, that is to say, to act as a final cause.

Is pleasure the ultimate end which a Man worthy of the name must give himself to; that which, in the last analysis, he lives for, other goods being desirable to him only insofar as they give him pleasure? It is necessary here to distinguish between the sensible appetite and the spiritual appetite. The former has indeed pleasure as its end, but the spiritual appetite does not. This distinction is expressed quite well by St. Thomas who writes: "The apprehension of the senses does not attain to the universal good, but to some particular good which is delightful. And consequently, according to the sensitive appetite which is in animals, operations are sought for the sake of delight. But the intellect apprehends the universal good, the attainment of which results in delight wherefore its purpose is directed to good rather than to delight. Hence it is that God adjusted delights to operations on account of the operations" (I-II 4,2).

The pleasure of an action is not something extrinsic to it. One and the other are bound up together and do not admit of separation. As we have seen, pleasure takes a complementary part in the perfection of action. Therefore, though pleasure is not the last end, it is incorporated into it; it is part of it; it accompanies it normally.

A final observation will allow us to correctly situate the final causality exercised by pleasure. St. Thomas distinguishes two kinds of end, or better, two components of every end: the thing itself, the goodness of what is loved, and the act which permits the attainment of this thing. He gives the example of a miser whose double end is money and the posession of money. The thing itself which is desired as end, is that which constitutes happiness, and makes Man happy; but the attainment of this thing is called happiness (I-II 2,7).

We can therefore say that an end, and especially the last end, is a reality both complex and one. It includes the thing (object of the appetite), the act which has this

thing for object, and the pleasure which is concomitant with this act. These three components are not like three equal parts, more or less connected. They constitute an organic entity, graded, as it were, by an intrinsic finality: pleasure is related to action, which is related to its object.

The moral end of man is thus, all in one: the reality of the honest good, the act which gives it to him, and the pleasure which accompanies this act. It can thus be concluded that the virtuous man's pleasure is included in the last end which he gives to himself. It is included in it, but it is not its only component, not even its main component. The rule of pleasure is in the reality and in the moral honesty of love which is inclined towards this reality.

## ii. Pleasure, the servant of virtue

According to Thomas, pleasure is not only a formal and final cause of action, in the secondary and relative way mentioned above; it is also an efficient cause in the manner of an indirect agent (I-II 33,3). Pleasure increases the activity which it accompanies. Each class of things is better judged and brought to precision by those who engage in the activity with pleasure. Those who are fond of music make progress in their proper function by enjoying it; so pleasure intensifies the activities. When we enjoy anything very much we do not throw ourselves into anything else. The pleasure arising from thinking and learning will make us think and learn all the more. The fact of taking pleasure in a given activity brings it about that one is more eagerly intent on it, and carries it out with greater care and perseverance. On the contrary, we never do that which we do with sorrow so well as that which we do with pleasure (I-II 37,3).

One will conclude from this that it is good and desirable to feel pleasure in acting morally well. This pleasure will have a happy effect on the growth of virtues, on the intensity and the quality of morally good acts. None takes pleasure save in that which is loved in some way and this pleasure does nothing but intensify

love. To feel joy in doing good is to increase the love of this good and the hope of reaching it.

Pleasure is also a test of virtue. It is possible to do an exterior act of virtue without having this virtue; one can be inclined to do so by fear, for example, or by habit, even an exceptional demand of the conscience but which does not suffice to create a virtuous habit. All this is not the work of genuine virtue, that is to say, of that dynamism acquired by exercise which inclines the virtuous Man to love the honest good, in a stable way. The virtuous Man alone takes pleasure in doing good. This pleasure is therefore a test of virtue. One cannot get the pleasure of the just Man without being just, nor that of the musical Man without being musical, and so on. The Man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good.

### iii. Divine dimension of pleasure

Pleasures are genuine means of entering into contact with real spiritual values. Though the values are great, the pleasures may be very simple ones. If we are going to find God, it will not be in heady abstractions but in all the lovely and homely things of our everyday lives.

Man's capacity for pleasure is God-given. The very way in which his first home is described points to man's preparation for pleasure. His place, described as a garden is one of sensuous delight. The divine pleasure principle is confirmed in the words and actions of the Incarnate Word. Jesus was no ascetic, but he ate and drank as any ordinary man of his time. Indeed, his first miracle seems to sanctify the principle of pleasure. He heightened the delight of a wedding party by changing water into wine. And among his last words to his followers, just before the long pain of the cross, were promises of joy.

Thus Christianity answers the first question of Man's high capacity for pleasure by showing that he was made for joy by the Being who invented pleasure.

Pleasure presents another major question in Man's insatiable desire for it. Man seem to be built for something they cannot experience, but have a dim knowledge of. Man's inordinately high capacity for pleasure seems

to indicate a qualitative difference between himself and the lower animals, and his failure to completely fill that capacity seems to point to something unattainable in his present experience. For though we do indeed find ourselves in the chaos of mere existence, our unfulfilled longings seem to indicate vaguely that there is a solution to the problem of pleasure and beyond the empty non-solution of courageously facing the apparent absurdity. We keep searching for the object of our ultimate longing, namely God.

#### iv. Other benefits of pleasure

1) Pleasure is a necessary element in life because, if there were no pleasure, one essential part of the total personality of Man would not be satisfied. Certainly in life there is the basic need to work; but equally certainly, there is the basic need to play. The desire to play is instinctive. No one needs teach animals to play. No one needs teach children to play. Long before they come to the games which have their special rules and which a child has to be taught, they have their own games and their own play. 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy', the proverb says. It does not only make him a dull boy but it makes him unnatural too.

2) Pleasure relaxes the mind. The mind can become tired just as the body can become tired. It comes to a state when it works slowly and laboriously like a machine running down. It comes to a time when it works inefficiently, and when it makes mistakes. The relaxation of the mind is essential. Everyone needs some relaxation. One may find it doing nothing; another may find it in a hobby, in game, in music, in reading a novel, or in spending some time with friends. When a person is engaged in these things at the right time, he is far from wasting time. He is recharging the energies of his mind.

3) Pleasure refreshes the body. The surest way to injure the spiritual life is to neglect the body. The truth is that many a man might work better if he played. Pleasure is that which relaxes the mind and refreshes the body, and it is no credit to a man, if he says that he has no time for it.

Sensuous pleasure is good and our desire for it is certainly not a distortion. Our senses are doorways to a world of pleasant experiences; and the world around us is profuse in the smells, sounds, and sights that bring intense pleasure to our lives. They make life rich, intense and varied. To accept and delight in the sensuous is to be enraptured by the gifts of God. To deny ourselves all sensuous pleasure is no virtue. It is to spurn God's splendid creation of things. It flattens the splendidly uneven contours of life.

We have only recently begun to understand that pleasure is an indispensable dimension of human living and makes an indispensable contribution to personality growth. We are not yet at ease with these facts and it is going to take us time to sort out puzzle from confusion, to establish wisdom which will enable us to distinguish authentic and healthy pleasure instincts from unhealthy self-deception<sup>8</sup>.

#### v. Pleasure and original sin

The new life imparted to us by the Holy Spirit is not to be thought of as a new nature implanted within us, yet somehow distinct from what we actually are; it is rather a vitalizing new life from the Holy Spirit, interpenetrating the whole of our mental, moral and spiritual nature. Human nature itself is sanctified and refined by the Holy Spirit.

When we speak of the "depravity" of our Adamic human nature, we dare not mean that our humanness is totally bad. If it were, we would be demons, not humans. From beginning to end, the Bible recognizes the good as well as the evil in our fallen nature. By "depravity" we mean, that every part of our nature as members of Adam's fallen race, is badly affected. It does not mean a complete moral rottenness.

In the words of John Glaser, besides 'original sin' there is 'original goodness'. All the way through, Scrip-

8. Andrew Greeley, *Life for a Wanderer*, New York, 1969, pp. 58-65
9. John Glaser, 'Eastered Heart: Good News of Morality', *New Catholic World*, 1979, pp. 198-237. I depend very heavily on this article.

ture assumes and appeals to this presence of remaining good in our hereditary humankind. We shall not gain a fully scriptural idea of our sanctification unless we recognize both of these hereditary aspects — original sin and original goodness. Yes, regeneration regenerates us. It does not merely attach to 'us' a supposed 'new' nature. It is we ourselves who become spiritually reborn; and the new life is meant to renew our whole nature.

The words 'Easter' and 'virtue' are not intimates by tradition. It is regrettable. And while we would not like 'virtue' to be the first association that comes when we think of Easter, we would like 'Easter' to be the first thought that comes to mind when we say 'virtue'. This is because the reality and message of Easter is the horizon-truth and starting point of all Christian theologizing. It seems that moral and spiritual theology is least aware of this.

In the present day literature of humanistic psychology, especially in Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, we find a deep trust in Man's heart. These psychologists announce the good news that Man's heart moves towards growth, that it tends to expand rather than shrivel when an atmosphere of trust and support are provided. They have said often: 'I have found in my experience that Man's heart deserves trust, not suspicion.'

What these psychologists are saying very clearly and explicitly from their therapeutic experience is also central to the Christian vision of Man. But Christian theology has never said it quite so clearly, so emphatically, in such a moving and explicit way. More than that, implicitly and indirectly our tradition seemed to be saying something quite different from this message of trust and hope in Man's heart. Somehow the message was coming across that Man's heart was not very trustworthy; we could expect it to be selfish rather than generous if given a chance.

In the Christ-event we have a starting point which urges us to look on Man's heart as *Eastered* (Rom 5:15-21). If we read this text correctly, it says in essence that Christ has far exceedingly outdone Adam. He has

stamped hearts and history with a future. In Christ we have the presence of God's gracious 'yes' to every heart.

This is an incredible statement; it is good news for dancing. That such a text should shine through traditional theology again and again is no surprise. The surprise is that it usually shows up as a central scriptural proof for the teaching on original sin.

In our theological training this text was not presented as highlighting Christ's impact on all hearts. It was never translated into an anthropological statement about Man's heart in the New Dispensation. But the curious thing is that the Adam impact was translated into such an anthropological statement. The text was used to support the teaching that *every Man ever born (except Mary)* was born with Adam's stamp of original sin, every Man had a will weakened and an intellect darkened by Adam's influence.

Christ has Eastered all hearts. If this is true, then, all Men live in the radiance of Easter. No one experiences reality with merely 'natural' or weakened and darkened heart. We had no trouble accepting the teaching that all Men saw reality through an original-sin-darkened heart. It is puzzling how unquestioningly this negative existential can be taken for granted, and how strong the resistance is to its positive counterpart, the Christ existential.

Our greatest ally in helping one another grow is not instruction, persuasion, advice or a set of ideal norms against which to measure ourselves. But if one element can be isolated as the single most important factor in growth, it is *Man's very heart itself*, a dynamic thrust toward life, goodness, growth. Mutual help in growth is not caging and controlling a beast; rather it is helping to free a complex, intricate heart that strains to grow, a heart that is multi-dimensional with frequent conflicts between these dimensions, but at its core incorrigible in its desire to grow.

In conclusion, the Christian life was never meant to be an everlasting 'penitential form', a continual returning of the prodigal from the far country; an incessant repe-

tition of the publican's groan: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'. We are still sinners, but we are no longer merely perpetual petitioners for pardon. We have found the everlasting mercy and the blood-bought forgiveness which covers all our sins. Although we still grieve our Father, we are no longer prodigals; we are at home, restored to true sonship, and in filial fellowship with him.

Many NT references add up to a magnificent certificate of assurance, an assurance of eternal salvation in Christ, and of unlimited welcome as sons and daughters of God. Therefore we no longer limp there in prodigal's rags, or uncertainly beg as abject aliens. We draw near with filial confidence, gratefully to appreciate what has already been guaranteed.

### c. Moral aspects of pleasure

#### i. Morality and pleasure<sup>10</sup>

Pleasure is part of the object of morality, as far as it follows naturally all moral activity (ST I.II 59, 4,ad 1). A moralist can scarcely avoid giving attention to pleasure since it accompanies all right action, since the better the action, the better the pleasure, since, finally, the pleasure one feels in acting morally is the best encouragement to practise virtue and the surest criterion of morality.

We recall that morality, in Aristotle's conception, is directed by love, the love of the honest good. This honest good is the specific object of all the virtues which are to be conceived as dynamisms which tend toward a 'beautifying' end. Morality is thus directed by a search for the Good, which includes the happiness of the subject. Morality, therefore, includes in its finality the search for joy and pleasure, the problem being to desire them and to experience them in a way both reasonable and conformable to human nature.

This Aristotelian conception seems to harmonize very well with Christian revelation. Having come from God man returns freely to God. This progress is directed by the desire of happiness (ST I.II 1-5). Thus morality finds in this desire its principle and its inner dynamism. This

10. Albert Ple, op. cit., pp 94-96

happiness, the object of morality, is in fact the realization of the image and resemblance of God which we are.

The search for happiness is therefore included in the finality of all virtue. In the light of this principle which animates the whole morality of St. Thomas, it can be held that just as the secondary ends and means are, in their final causality itself, related explicitly or not, to the last end, so too the secondary pleasures (sensible or spiritual) are related to perfect beatitude (ST I-II 1, 6, 13).

3). As a result these pleasures are a sort of token or better a foretaste of eternal beatitude; they find in this the best of their attractiveness and favourable influence on the whole moral life.

Then the search for pleasure, granted that it is correctly ordered, is far from opposing moral life. This general principle applies to each action in particular. When the end of an action is in conformity with the reasonable nature of Man, this action is morally good (I-II 18-21). If an action is morally good, its pleasure and the desire for this pleasure are good too; they even add to it a great moral value. If the action is evil, the pleasure is evil too.

## ii. Morality of pleasure

William Barclay lays down the following principles by which the morality of pleasure may be judged<sup>11</sup>. First, no pleasure can be right if its effects on the person who enjoys it are harmful. There are pleasures which can injure a Man's body and which in the end can have a permanent ill-effect on his health. There are pleasures which can coarsen a Man's moral fibre. There are others which can weaken a Man's character and also his power to resist evil. Any pleasure which leaves a Man less physically fit, less mentally alert, less morally sensitive is wrong. Second, no pleasure can be right if its effect on others is harmful. There are pleasures which can result in the corruption of other people, either physically

11. William Barclay, *Ethics in a Permissive Society*, London, 1971,  
pp. 120-124

or morally. Third, a pleasure which becomes an addiction can never be right. The minute a Man feels that some pleasure is gripping him in such a way that he cannot do without it, he will well be advised to avoid it before it breaks him. In the fourth place, a pleasure is wrong, if to enjoy it the essentials of life have to take a lesser place than what is proper. Anything in life that gets out of proportion is wrong. Whenever any pleasure takes time and money which should have gone to things and to people of greater importance in life, it is wrong. In the fifth place, any pleasure which can be a source of danger to others must be carefully thought about. This is not something on which we can lay down definite rules and regulations. It is something for a Man's own conscience to decide within the context of the life he has to live. But a Man is selfish if he insists on his own pleasure in that which may ruin his brother or sister. In the sixth place the ultimate test of any pleasure is this: Will it or will it not be followed by regret? Any pleasure that brings one regret is wrong. It is essential to take the long-term view of pleasure. It is not enough to ask: How does this feel like at this moment, but what will I feel about this in time to come? The Christian must ask not only what the thing will feel like in time to come, but also what it will feel like in eternity? And if that be so, the supreme test of pleasure is: Can it bear the scrutiny of God? The morally perfect attitude towards pleasure consists in 'enjoying it as if it were not enjoyed', to adopt St. Paul's words (1 Cor 7:31).

#### **d. Virtue of sensibility**

The extremist who condemns pleasure as unnatural is rightly censured by Aristotle and St. Thomas as 'insensible' and guilty of the 'vice of insensibility'.

It is the will of God that Man should be a physico-spiritual being, and that his spiritual life should be served by sense organs. Sensibility (pleasure enjoyment) is therefore essential to the nature of Man, and whoever despises it, is not thinking along Christian lines but along the Manichean. The virtue of sensibility is the capacity to draw pleasure from the experiences of the senses,

for instance, from a beautiful sight, a charming sound, a stirring fragrance, a soothing touch, an exciting taste. It is the direct and natural effect of the meeting of sensitive organs and their proper object. These organs are part of Man as God created him. Their response to environment is automatic, but the use made of this response and the manner in which it is sought are dependent upon the laws of morality, for a pleasure is good only when it is the effect of an act which is itself good.

Any pleasure is in itself healthy and good. Little does it matter if this pleasure is vehement, if it should hinder the use of reason when it breaks forth, as is the case in orgasm. What is important is not the intensity of the pleasure but its reasonableness, the way in which the power to love is affected. Virtue is not concerned with the amount of pleasure experienced by the external senses, as this depends on the disposition of the body. What matters is how much of the interior disposition is affected by that pleasure. It is not contrary to virtue if the act of reason be sometimes interrupted for something that is done in accordance with reason; else it would be against virtue for a person to go to sleep.

### Conclusion

An asceticism which eschews all pleasure is not good, for in setting out to repress pleasure it must repress the natural functions which pleasure is designed to encourage. Such asceticism is opposed to the ideal of mental health which is the full expression of all our potentialities in harmony. Here the problem is not the legitimacy of pleasure or its enjoyment but rather the coordination of pleasure with the other goals of human life. Pleasure must be limited if it is to be enjoyed; but limitation does not mean that pleasure is to be feared or repressed or denied. It merely means that it must be seen in the context of the whole life project of the total human personality.

# **Refining the Mirror: Asceticism of St. Francis of Assisi**

## **Mirror Image**

In the spiritual literature of the Middle Ages, the mirror image was very popular. If we think of a mirror only as a shiny surface, in which we see our own reflection, we shall fail to penetrate the profound meaning of their use of this image. The medieval concept was that one gazed into a mirror to see there what one should become. St. Francis is called the 'mirror of Christ' because by means of such loving contemplation of Christ crucified he was transformed into a living reflection of the image beheld.

## **Light and darkness**

It is a fact of life that there is light and darkness in every individual. Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of St. Francis, has recorded that almost up to the twenty-fifth year of his age, he squandered his life. He is said to have outdone all his contemporaries in vanities and in all kinds of foolishness and promotion of evil<sup>1</sup>. Thus Francis must have had his share of darkness in him. As gold in fire, Francis was purified in the crucible of mortification and suffering before he could become the "mirror of Christ". It would be beneficial for us to investigate the later transformation of Francis into the mirror of Christ.

## **Encounter with Christ crucified**

Though there are many factors that have contributed

1. Thomas of Celano, First Life, 2; cf. M. A. Habig, St. Francis of Assisi: *Omnibus of Sources*, p. 230.

and led to the conversion of St. Francis, the main event that shaped it and put its stamp on it was definitely the one described by St. Bonaventure in his 'Major Life'<sup>2</sup>. One day, as Francis was praying in one secluded spot, Jesus Christ appeared to him as hanging on the cross. His soul melted at the sight and the memory of Christ's passion was vividly impressed on the depths of his heart. Thereon, whenever he thought of it, he could scarcely restrain his tears. He realized that the words of the gospel were addressed to him. "If you have a mind to come my way, renounce yourself and take up your cross and follow me" (Mtt 16:24). This was one of the texts that Francis found, when he opened the gospel at San Niccolo in order to learn the will of God for himself and his first brethren.

On the cross Francis saw God's love for him and that love compelled him to become like the crucified by self-denial and abnegation. He sought to enter into and identify himself with the victim of Calvary. Love has the remarkable power of making the lover like the beloved and it manifested that power in the life of Francis. 'Keep back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that God may receive you wholly who has given himself wholly to you'. The life of penance and mortification is the conscious answer of love to the unspeakable love which God bestows on us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thus we find that at the very heart of the Franciscan life stands the figure of Jesus Christ and by seeking to follow his footsteps in all things, detachment, self-denial and mortification became part and parcel of the Franciscan life from the very beginning.

### Penance for Francis

Before going into details of Francis' work of purification, it may be good to understand what Francis means by doing penance, since penance is the central point in the spirituality of St. Francis.

2. St. Bonaventure, *Legenda major* I, 5, *Omnibus*, pp. 638-639.

3. A Letter to the Entire Order; cf. Francis and Clare, *The Complete Works* (tr. Armstrong and Brady), New York, 1982, p. 58.

Shortly before his death, Francis looking back at his life saw that its true beginning was penance, for he says in his Testament: 'The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance this way: While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body; and afterward I lingered a little and left the world'<sup>4</sup>. Here was the beginning of the penance of St. Francis, his change of mind and heart.

For Francis, the word 'penance' had the biblical significance of 'conversion'. It is not a 'state' but an itinerary, a way leading to God. Cajetan Esser observes 'Penance signified for Francis, a turning over that leads man from a life instinctively centered in himself to a life entirely abandoned and subjected to the will of God'<sup>5</sup>. Such a turning involves a total conforming of man's will to the Will of God.

### **Detachment**

In the beginning of Francis' conversion there is the touching scene in the bishop's court when Francis standing naked before the bishop gave back to his father, not only the money he had taken from him but also his clothes, saying 'From now on I can advance naked before the Lord, saying in truth no longer: my father, Peter Bernadone, but our Father who art in Heaven'. These words and action symbolize the essence of poverty which implies the total renunciation of everything earthly and attaching of oneself to God — 'my God and my all'. Francis is popularly known as 'Il Poverello' — the poor little man. His passion for poverty came from his personal experience of the crucified at the beginning of his conversion as mentioned above. According to the testimony of Celano Francis' entire riches from his entrance till his death was a single tunic, a cord and breeches<sup>6</sup>. Francis

4. Testament 1-3, Francis and Clare, p. 154.

5. Cajetan Esser O.F.M & Engelbert Grau D.F.M, *Loves Reply*, Chicago 1963, p.2

6. II Celano, 55, *Omnibus*, pp. 410-411

testifies to the utter poverty of the primitive community in his Testament, 'we were content with one tunic patched within and without, by those who wished, with a cord and breeches and we wished for nothing more'<sup>7</sup>.

This was exactly the life of Francis and his first companions at Rivo Torto about one mile from Portiumcula. There they found an empty hut. It was in every way according to the heart of Francis. The place was so small that the brothers could scarcely sit or lie one next to another. Here they lived in great poverty devoid of all things. Bread was frequently so difficult to obtain that they were forced to satisfy their hunger with turnips which they had begged from the peasants in the country about Assisi. Francis and his companions rejoiced exceedingly as if they had found a priceless treasure in the possession of lady poverty. They despised all earthly things as dung for love of her.

Thomas Celano says that no one can desire wealth as ardently as Francis desired poverty; no one guards a treasure as diligently as he guarded this pearl of the gospel. Nothing saddened his eye more than when he beheld within or without the house anything that was contrary to poverty<sup>8</sup>.

Francis' poverty did not stop with the total renunciation of material goods. He identified so totally with the self-emptying of the Poor Crucified, that he was prepared even to forfeit his health. Though the doctor informed Francis that he was losing his sight because of his constant weeping over the passion of our Lord, still he was not prepared to stop it and thus prevent complete blindness.

Francis' vision of poverty soars still higher. In his Admonitions XIV, he says: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs' (Mt 5:3). There are many who, applying themselves insistently to prayers and good deeds, engage in much abstinence and many mortifications of their bodies but they are scandalized and quickly roused to anger by a single harsh word.

7. Testament 16-17, Francis and Clare p. 155

8. II Celano 55,- Omnibus, pp. 410-411.

These persons are not poor in spirit, because one who is truly poor in spirit hates himself (Lk 14.26) and loves those who strike him on the cheek' (Mtt 5:39).

The Son of God made Himself our Way and that way was especially the way of poverty. Francis embraced that way and walked that way even to the heights of La Verna. St. Bonaventure remarks in his *Major Life* of St. Francis that he attained the perfection of poverty not as he stripped himself before the bishop nor as he fasted or endured cold but rather as he is on La Verna wrapped in contemplation of the goodness of God and sealed by the marks of the cross. Here we see the poor Francis with complete nudity of the heart and so could say 'I live now but not I, Christ lives in me'.

### Mortification

Alongside his detachment from all that was not God we must consider the tenacity and love which coloured his physical austerities. Those who are quick to dismiss extreme acts of mortification as follies of saints not meriting our serious attention, are separating body and spirit which never did. The whole of our humanity serves our journey into God. Evelyn Underhill in her *Mysticism* describes this process of expression thus: 'The self-obliteration in which adoring love culminates must find some costly act, however inadequate, by which it can be expressed in spontaneous gifts and gestures which would seem absurd to those who had no clue to their meaning. Here those who look with elite horror or contempt on physical austerities miss the point and set up an unchristian contrast between body and soul'<sup>9</sup>.

From the first day on which Francis began to withdraw from the world, he imposed such severe penances upon himself that he was derided as a fool<sup>10</sup>.

The sight of lepers was very loathsome to Francis. He was so fastidious in his ways that he would look at

9. Evelyn underhill-Mysticism, New York 1955 (Worship, 25)

10. I Celano 11, Omnibus, p. 238,

their houses only from a distance of two miles and then he would hold his nostrils with his hands<sup>11</sup>. In his Testament he says, 'while I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them'<sup>12</sup>. In Prayer Francis gained the necessary light and strength to overcome even this aversion and disgust. God said to him in spirit, 'what you have loved carnally and vainly you should now exchange for spiritual things, and taking the bitter for sweet, despise yourself if you wish to acknowledge me; for you will have a taste for what I speak of even if the order is reversed'<sup>13</sup>.

Soon he was led to actual experience, for he met a leper one day and he embraced and kissed him. One can better imagine how nauseating and mortifying it must have been for a delicate and dainty young man like Francis to do such an act! But with God's grace Francis won his first victory over himself. From then on he began to despise himself more and more and even visited regularly the dwelling places of lepers and he served them devotedly with all humility and kindness<sup>14</sup>. Thus by the mercy of the Lord, he won perfect victory over himself.

Now let us look into other modes of his mortifications. Francis was very austere in his clothing when he appeared before the Bishop of Assisi and divested himself of his rich garments, he wore on his body nothing but a hair-shirt<sup>15</sup>. Later on he fashioned for himself an exceedingly rough and poor garment, in order to crucify his flesh night and day<sup>16</sup>.

Not only in his clothing but also in his food he exercised the utmost rigour denying himself all that was not absolutely necessary to sustain life<sup>17</sup>. His axiom in this re-

11. Ibid., pp. 242-243,

12. Testament 1-2, Francis and Clare p. 154.

13. II Celano 9, Omnibus pp. 369-370.

14. L. M. 1, 6, Omnibus pp. 639 640.

15. Ibid., II, 4, pp. 642-643.

16. I Celano 22, Omnibus pp. 246-247.

17. L. M. V, 1, Omnibus pp. 662-663.

gard was that it is hardly possible to satisfy the needs of the body without indulging in sensual appetite<sup>21</sup>. He spent the greater part of the year in rigorous fasting. At one time he fasted forty days, partaking of no food whatever in order thus to imitate the example of the Saviour. But towards the end of this fast he ate half a loaf of bread, lest he should boast of having fasted continuously as his divine Master had done (Lk 10:7). This constant and merciless chastisement gradually brought his body to complete subjection. But on the very day of his death he confessed candidly that he had sinned greatly against the Brother Body<sup>19</sup>.

### **Passive purgation**

As the founder and charismatic leader of the Order, Francis' duties and obligations were manifold and pressing; also his anguish and pain. He was filled with sorrow when some of the friars left their former occupations and lost the simplicity of their prior life. Besides there was suffering due to his physical illness. Francis' illness started in the fall of 1202, during his imprisonment in the damp and airless Perugian dungeon, following Assisi's defeat in the battle with Perugia<sup>20</sup>. Here he contracted the first of many ailments, either Malaria or more likely, pulmonary tuberculosis. After many months he was ransomed by his father, but he took almost a year to recuperate<sup>21</sup>. At Damietta, Francis was attacked by malaria or some other kind of fever. He also developed a flux of the bowels and stomach pain as well. Some biographers think he had an attack of cancer too.

But the worst agony was with his sight<sup>22</sup>. During the last four years of his life his eyes became very sensitive to light. He who loved Brother Sun and Sister Moon and Stars and brilliant Brother Fire and called them

18. I Celano 51, Omnibus pp. 272-272.

19. II Celano, 211, Omnibus pp. 530-531.

20. II Celano 4, Omnibus p. 364.

21. I Celano 3, Omnibns p. 231.

22. I Celano 98, 99, 102, 105, 108. Omnibus pp. 312, 313, 316-317, 319-320, 321-322.

'beautiful' and 'fair' in the Canticle<sup>23</sup> could barely stand brightness. There were periods of acceleration and remission with occasional total loss of vision and severe headaches. A few months before his death Francis' ulcers in his stomach got worsened and ruptured<sup>24</sup>. He vomited blood. Years of malnutrition had taken its toll.

Lastly like Christ Francis was all but literally nailed to the cross. He had prayed for two favours from the Lord: to feel the pains of crucifixion and to feel the love that prompted its acceptance<sup>25</sup>. At La Verna in 1224, just two years before his death this favour was granted him. By his stigmatization, Francis became a crucified man in every sense with the accompanying pain and suffering<sup>26</sup>.

Francis was by nature gay and joyous, as the Three Companions attest<sup>27</sup>. This characteristic mood was not destroyed by his sufferings. Joy assuaged and sanctified even his own sufferings and maladies. The Three Companions remark: 'His heart rejoiced so much in the Lord that his weakened and mortified body became strong enough to endure all hard and bitter things most joyously for God the Lord<sup>28</sup>. Even when his sufferings grew to a veritable martyrdom he preserved his wonted smiling cheerfulness<sup>29</sup>.

Only once, at the approach of death, his usual cheerfulness threatened to leave him. Tortured by unspeakable pains he struggled one night in prayer for knightly fortitude until the end. Suddenly he heard in spirit a consoling voice: 'Rejoice, brother, and exult in thy weakness and tribulation and trust so confidently as if thou wert already in My Kingdom'. The following

23 The Canticle of Brother Sun, Francis and Clare, pp. 38-39.

24 I Celano 105, 107, Omnibus, pp. 319-321.

25. The Little Flowers of St. Francis: Third Consideration, Omnibus p. 1448.

26. I Celano 93-96, Omnibus, pp. 307-311.

27. The Three Companions 4, Omnibus p. 893.

28. Ibid., 22, pp. 912-913.

29. I Celano 107, Omnibus pp. 320-321.

morning his soul rose to the sublimest heights and composed that hymn of joy, the Canticle of the sun. Francis requested the brothers to sing this Canticle to himself again and again in those last days <sup>30</sup>.

We started with the mirror image. Francis actually became the mirror of Christ, the living image of the Crucified. Through detachment, mortification and passive purgation, he had removed all obstacles to Christ's spirit acting in him and through him in full measure. He became what St. John mentions in his gospel, a fountain of living water (Jn 7:38).

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30. Ibid., pp. 322 323.

Francis Alapatt

# INDEX

to

JEEVADHARA 103-108 (Vol. XVIII)

1988

Sl. No.	I. Index of Articles	Nos.	Pages
1.	Agony and Anguish: The Psalmist in his Sufferings T. J. Raja Rao	104	94-100
2.	(Christian) Asceticism: Imitation of Christ Mathew Parinthirickal	108	415-427
3.	(Refining the Mirror:) Asceticism of St. Francis of Assisi Francis Alapatt	108	462-470
4.	(The Actual Difficulties of the) Dialogue between Muslims and Christians Maurice Borrmans	105	212-228
5.	(Liberation Ethics of) Ecology S. Arokiasamy	103	32-39
6.	Ecology and Culture M. Amaladoss	103	40-54
7.	(The) Ecological Problem in India and its Consequences Yvon Ambroise	103	5-22
8.	(Efforts for) Evangelization Cherian Kochupurackal	107	319-325
9.	(Problems of) Evangelization Eugene D'Souza; J. Dilasa; S. Alancheril; Mariella; Mirabelle; John Chethimattam	107	326-349
10.	(Critique of) Hedonism Aleyamma Abraham	108	428-434

11.	Jesus in the Qu'ran Mathew Paraplackal	105	167-178
12.	(Individual) Laments in Hebrew Poetry: a Positive Response to the Problem of Suffering Udobata Onunwa	104	101-111
13.	(Theology of) Liturgy: Liturgical Tradition and Traditions Paul Puthenangady	106	257-269
14.	(The) Liturgical Rites in India: Their Origin and Historical Development Thomas Elavanal	106	270-278
15.	Liturgical Inculturation in India: Problems and Prospects of Experimentation Louis Malieckal	106	279-292
16.	(The) Liturgical Crisis in the Syro-Malabar Church Antony Nariculam	106	293-302
17.	(Theology of) Mission Today John B. Chethimattam	107	350-361
18.	(Statement of the Seminar on) Mission in India Today The Task of St. Thomas Christians Dharmaram, Bangalore	107	362-372
19.	Muhammad as Liberator Asghar Ali Engineer	105	189-201
20.	(The Theological Situation now in) Muslim-Christian Dialogue Thomas Michel	105	157-166
21.	Nature, Technology and the New Society Bede Griffiths	103	23-31
22.	Nature and Human Survival Felix Wilfred	103	55-75
23.	(Theological Understanding of) Penance Today Cyprian Illickamury	108	397-414
24.	(Critique of) Rigourism Felix Podimattam	108	435-461

25.	(Church and) Secular Welfare according to Karl Rahner Sebastian Athappilly	107	373.381
26.	(The attitude of Jesus towards) Suffering John Kallikuzhuppil	104	112.120
27.	(Discipleship and) Suffering in the Gospel of Mark Paul S. Pudusseray	104	121.139
28.	('When I am Weak, Then I am Strong' (2 Cor 12:10): Pauline understanding of Apostolic Sufferings J.M. Pathrapankal	104	140.151
29.	(Discussion forum: Bible on) Suffering J. B. Chethimattam	105	229.231
30.	Symbols in Life and Worship M. Amaladoss	106	237.256
31.	(The Mission of the 'Ebed Yahweh and his) Vicarious Suffering Abraham Pezhumkattil	104	81.93
32.	Women in Islam: Spirit and Progress Zeenat Shaukat Ali	105	232.211
33.	(Ways of) Worship in Hinduism: Some Guidelines for an Indian Christian Liturgy Thomas Manickam	106	303.312
34.	(The) Zeal and the Seal of the Prophets Kenneth Cragg	105	179.188

#### Book Reviews

India Awaiting the Good News:  
By Cherian Kochupurackal CMI,  
Ernakulam;CMI General Mission  
Secretariat, 1988, pp.142

Kuncheria Pathil 107 389.392

Mission in India Today,  
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ed. by Kuncheria Pathil CMI;  
Bangalore: Dharmaram Publi-  
cation, 1988, pp.xvi, 365

John B. Chethimattam 107 382.388

Sl. No.	II. Index of Authors	Nos.	Pages
1.	Aleyamma Abraham Critique of Hedonism	108	428-434
2.	Alancheril S. Our Work of Evangelization	107	331
3.	Ali Shaukat Zeenat Women in Islam: Spirit and Progress	105	202-211
4.	Alapatt Francis Refining the Mirror: Asceticism of St. Francis of Assisi	108	462-470
5.	Amaladoss M. Ecology and Culture Symbols in Life and Worship	103 106	40-54 237-256
6.	Ambroise Yvon The Ecological Problem in India and its Consequences	103	5-22
7.	Arokiasamy S. Liberation Ethics of Ecology	103	32-39
8.	Athappilly Sebastian Church and Secular Welfare according to Karl Rahner	107	373-381
9.	Borrmans Maurice The Actual difficulties of the Dialogue between Muslims and Christians	105	212-228
10.	Chethimattam J. B. Theology of Mission Today Discussion Forum: Bible on Suffering	107 105	350-361 229-231
11.	Cragg Kenneth The Zeal and the Seal of the Prophets	105	179-188
12.	Dharmaram, Bangalore Statement of the Seminar on Mission in India Today The Task of St. Thomas Christians	107	362-372
13.	Dilasa J. Let us Face Facts	107	329-331
14.	D'Souza Eugene Let us be Realistic	107	332-335

15.	Elavanal Thomas The Liturgical Rites in India: Their Origin and Historical Development	106	270-278
16.	Engineer Ali Asghar Muhammad as Liberator	105	189-201
17.	Griffiths Bede Nature, Technology and the New Society	103	23.31
18.	Illickamury Cyprian Theological understanding of Penance Today	108	397-414
19.	Kallikuzhuppil John The Attitude of Jesus towards Suffering	104	112-120
20.	Kochupurackal Cherian Efforts for Evangelization	107	319-325
21.	Malieckal Louis Liturgical Inculturation in India: Problems and Prospects of Experimentation	106	279-292
22.	Manickam Thomas Ways of Worship in Hinduism: Some Guidelines for an Indian Christian Liturgy	106	303-312
23.	Mariella Our Mission is Education	107	335-338
24.	Michel Thomas The Theological Situation now in Muslim-Christian Dialogue	105	157-166
25.	Mirabelle Our Mission is Education	107	338-339
26.	Nariculam Antony The Liturgical Crisis in the Syro-Malabar Church	106	293-302
27.	Onunwa Udobata Individual Laments in Hebrew Poetry: a Positive response to the Problem of Suffering	104	101.111

28.	Paraplackal Mathew Jesus in the Qu'ran	105	167-178
29.	Parinthirickal Mathew Christian Asceticism: Imitation of Christ	108	415-427
30.	Pathrapankal J. M. 'When I am Weak, Then I am Strong' (2 Cor 12:10): Pauline understanding of Apostolic Sufferings	104	140-151
31.	Pezhumkattil Abraham The Mission of the 'Ebed Yahweh and his Vicarious Suffering	104	81-93
32.	Podimattam Felix Critique of Rigourism	108	428-461
33.	Pudussery S. Paul Discipleship and Suffering in the Gospel of Mark	104	121-139
34.	Puthenangady Paul Theology of Liturgy: Liturgical Tradition and Traditions	106	257-269
35.	Rao Raja T. J. Agony and Anguish: The Psalmist in his Sufferings	104	94-100
36.	Wilfred Felix Nature and Human Survival	103	55-75

#### Book Reviews

Chethimattam John B. Mission in India Today, The Task of St. Thomas Christians, ed. by Kuncheria Pathil CMI; Bangalore: Dharmaram Publication, 1988, pp. xvi, 1365	107	382-388
Pathil Kuncheria India Awaiting the Good News: By Cherian Kochupurackal CMI, Ernakulam: CMI General Mission Secretariat, 1988, pp. 142	107	389-392